

## ABSTRACT

### God's Wildness: The Christian Roots of Ecological Ethics in American Literature

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Early Puritan colonists expressed conflicting views regarding the religious significance of the New World's natural environment. On the one hand, it was "the Devil's *Territories*" that God would transform into "a Mart" to enrich his church. On the other hand, it was "God's temple" in which humans should act as priests. While the first view justifies, even demands, America's voracious extractive economy, many literary artists have developed the latter view to imagine ways that humans might fulfill more caring, priestly roles within America's ecological communities. Instead of reordering the Devil's territories to suit human ends, these authors challenge readers to reorder their own lives in order to participate in God's wild ecology. This study examines the work of four American writers—Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Willa Cather, and Wendell Berry—to understand the different means they propose to enable humans to participate in the ongoing redemptive work that God desires to accomplish in his creation. Thoreau draws explicitly on Puritan forms of history and natural philosophy as he calls his neighbors to glorify and enjoy God "in his works." Muir's writings in support of the National Parks transfer the central tenets of Disciples of Christ theology to his own

“gospel of glaciers,” so he preached that humans could experience God’s presence most powerfully in primitive wilderness. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather models her priests’ reconciliatory work in their mission and gardens on the active submission to God’s will that enabled the Virgin Mary to participate in the Incarnation and Jesus to participate in his Father’s redemptive plan. In Berry’s essays and fiction, he articulates a “way of love” that humans can follow to honor and participate in God’s redemptive love for all creation. Each of these authors imagines practical ways by which humans can fulfill their role as priests in God’s wild temple, and their insights may help Americans reinterpret their religious traditions in order to find wisdom regarding how to care for the damaged ecological systems within which they live.

God's Wildness: The Christian Roots of Ecological Ethics in American Literature

by

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A Dissertation

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DCA</i>	<i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i> by Willa Cather
<i>HMJ</i>	<i>The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau</i> (Houghton Mifflin Co.) by Henry David Thoreau
<i>JC</i>	<i>Jayber Crow: The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself</i> by Wendell Berry
<i>JMP</i>	<i>John Muir Papers</i> by John Muir
<i>MOJ</i>	<i>The Memory of Old Jack</i> by Wendell Berry
<i>PJ</i>	<i>Journal (Princeton)</i> by Henry David Thoreau
<i>RP</i>	<i>Reform Papers</i> by Henry David Thoreau
<i>WA</i>	<i>Walden</i> by Henry David Thoreau

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Rediscovering the Roots: Learning to be Priests in God's Wild Temple

He discharges also the Office of a *Priest* for the *Creation*, under the Influences of an admirable Saviour, and therein asserts and assures his Title unto that *Priesthood*, which the Blessedness of the *future State* will very much consist in being advanced to. The whole *World* is indeed a *Temple* of GOD.

—Mather, *Christian Philosopher* 7

American wilderness confronted the Puritan colonists when they arrived in the New World to carry out their divine errand. They immediately had to set about determining what their efforts to plant a pure church should look like in this natural environment. Was this vast continent “the *Devil's Territories*” that needed to be conquered and cultivated for God's Kingdom? Or was it “a temple of God” in which to glorify and serve its Creator? The fact that both these appellations come from the same author, Cotton Mather, indicates the deep confusion the Puritans had regarding the character of this land and their proper relation to it. This confusion has had an enduring and profound legacy. This dissertation explores the effects of this legacy in some of the nation's foremost works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century environmental literature.

Before turning to these literary successors, though, a clearer idea is needed regarding what the Massachusetts Bay colonists thought about how they should understand and use the vast natural landscape, so different from what they had left behind in England, to which their errand had brought them. Reading through Puritan histories and sermons, it soon becomes apparent that while they spoke often about the divine end that brought them to the New World, they did not think as carefully about the physical

means by which they should fulfill this end. For instance, in his mammoth work of American history, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Cotton Mather criticizes the later European colonists who came to America not to found a pure church, but to gain greater economic opportunities. Mather describes a congregation of such individuals who mocked a visiting Puritan preacher: “one of our Ministers . . . urged them to approve themselves a *Religious People* from this Consideration, *That otherwise they would contradict the main end of Planting this Wilderness*; whereupon a well-known Person, then in the Assembly, cry’d out, *Sir, You are mistaken, you think you are Preaching to the People at the Bay; our main End was to catch Fish*” (*Magnalia* 147). Ironically, Mather follows this incident by reporting that God judged these sacrilegious fishermen through the financial failure of their colony. In other words, Mather makes economic success the standard by which people can know if they are properly carrying out God’s ends in the New World.

This economic view corroborates Mather’s description of the New World elsewhere as “the *Devil’s Territories*.” Writing in the late seventeenth century about the recent witchcraft epidemic in Salem, Mather explains that it is perfectly natural to suppose the Devil would oppose these Puritan colonists because they are infringing on his territory:

The *New-Englanders* are a People of God settled in those, which were once the *Devil’s Territories*; and it may easily be supposed that the *Devil* was exceedingly disturbed, when he perceived such a People here accomplishing the Promise of old made unto our Blessed Jesus, *That He should have the Utmost parts of the Earth for his Possession*. . . . The Devil thus Irritated, immediately try’d all sorts of Methods to overturn this poor Plantation. . . . I believe, that never were more *Satanical Devices* used for the Unsettling of any People under the Sun, than what have been Employ’d for the Extirpation of the *Vine* which God has here *Planted*,

*Casting out the Heathen, and preparing a Room before it, and causing it to take deep Root, and fill the Land. (Wonders 13)*<sup>1</sup>

Mather here links the wilderness and its savage inhabitants with the devil, and the settlers' agricultural civilization with the advance of the Church. He is very clear about the religious end of these settlers, but the physical means by which they should further the advance of God's church actually correspond to the physical means of those immigrants who came to the New World to get wealthy off of the land. If the wilderness is the devil's territory, then turning this disordered nature into profitable natural resources—regardless of the consequences for the native inhabitants and the existing ecological order—would be a sign that God's order is being brought to the New World. But in this case "God's" order begins to look very much like the economic order of the fishermen whose main end was to catch fish. Is there any practical difference, then, between those who are planting a restored church and those who are seeking financial profit? Both relate to the American wilderness as if their material wants are the standard of value by which nature should be ordered: one group simply states this outright and the other claims this reordering of wild nature signifies the advance of God's church. Thus, as William Cronon points out, European colonists in New England, regardless of their ostensibly religious aims, tended to view the natural landscape in terms of its commodity value (*Changes in the Land* 19–33).

Despite Puritan historians' repeated citations of material wealth as evidence of God's favor, many of them also record an ambivalence about the spiritual effects of economic success. They recognized that turning the wilderness into a set of extractable natural resources may not be the means by which they can best achieve God's end in the

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<sup>1</sup> Mather's vine imagery appears to derive from Ps. 80.8-9.

New World. Mather himself worries that the Puritan colonists, despite the “Prayerfulness” and “Watchfulness” with which they pursued “more glorious *Aims*” (*Magnalia* 142, 147), were susceptible to “the *Enchantments* of the World [that] make them forget *their Errand into the Wilderness*” (*Magnalia* 144). The conundrum, as Mather puts it, is that “*Religion* brought forth *Prosperity*, and the *Daughter* destroy’d the *Mother*” (*Magnalia* 143). William Bradford, in his history of the Plymouth settlement, sorrowfully observed this same phenomenon, attributing the loss of spiritual energy and church unity to the colonists’ material prosperity: “For now as their stocks increased, and the increase vendible, there was no longer any holding them together” (293). As people spread out seeking good land, the church divided, “And this, I fear, will be the ruine of New-England, at least of the churches of God there, and will provoke the Lords displeasure against them” (294). In these accounts, material prosperity seems to be a sign not of God’s blessing, but of spiritual decay.

This ambivalence comes through clearly in Edward Johnson’s history, *Wonder-working Providence of Sion’s Saviour* (1648). In his account of the physical hardships that the Puritans faced when they settled Concord, Johnson describes the ways that these challenges brought the community together and increased their spiritual fervor:

[T]he toyle of a new Plantation being like the labours of *Hercules* never at an end, yet are none so barbarously bent . . . but with a new Plantation they ordinarily gather into Church-fellowship, so that Pastors and people suffer the inconveniences together, which is a great means to season the sore labours they undergoe, and verily the edge of their appetite was greater to spirituall duties at their first coming in time of wants, than afterward: many in new Plantations have been forced to go barefoot, and bareleg, till these latter dayes, and some in time of Frost and Snow: Yet were they then very healthy more then now they are: in this Wildernesse-worke men of Estates speed no better than others, and some much worse for want of being inured to such hard labour. (83–84)

Johnson conveys an excitement about the opportunity here in the New World wilderness for each person to participate in the cultivation of God's church. Unlike those back in England, rich and poor, preachers and lay people all who are here engage equally in "this Wildernesse-worke." And these harsh physical conditions are the means by which God raises up his church.<sup>2</sup> Yet Johnson's description indicates that this initial time of harmony and spiritual fervor has passed. The people are less healthy now and their appetite for "spirituall duties" has lessened.

Despite these hints that material progress has not contributed to spiritual progress, near the end of his history Johnson points to financial prosperity as a sure sign of the Lord's blessing on these Puritan colonists:

[T]he Lord, whose promises are large to his Sion, hath blest his peoples provision, and satisfied her poor with bread, in a very little space. . . . [N]or could it be imagined, that this Wilderness should turn a mart for Merchants in so short a space, Holland, France, Spain, and Portugal coming hither for trade. . . . Thus hath the Lord been pleased to turn one of the most hideous, boundless, and unknown Wildernesses in the world in an instant, as 'twere (in companion of other work) to a well-ordered Commonwealth, and all to serve his Churches. (208–210)

So which is it? If these settlers came to the New World to found a primitive, pure church, and if the church is strengthened by harsh, wilderness work, why would God thwart this spiritual end by providing material blessings? In his rhapsodies about the wealth that America's natural resources can bring, Johnson has apparently forgotten his earlier admission that this economic success dulled the settlers' spiritual appetites. This apparent inconsistency does have biblical warrant as both these views find support in the Old Testament account of God's dealings with Israel: God led his people through a desert

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Cernich, writing about this account, explains that Johnson portrays the wilderness as God's "helpmate in [the] process of spiritual development" (54).

wilderness to increase their reliance on him, so physical hardships push the colonists toward God; on the other hand, God promised Israel that faithful, obedient living would result in material abundance, so physical blessings must indicate God's favor. Johnson's history reflects this tension without trying to resolve it by reference to other parts of the biblical narrative. What unites both of the views that Johnson expresses is the belief that the material and the spiritual are in conflict. Both those who see the wilderness as the devil's territories that need to be ordered and cultivated by the advancing church of God, and those who see the physical hardships of the early colonists as increasing their spiritual appetites share a dualistic view. This basic material/spiritual dualism that runs through the Puritan paradigm prevents them from imagining a harmonious physical order that would serve spiritual ends. They must conquer the natural world or be conquered by it, but either way, they remain focused on their spiritual state and pay little attention to the material means to cultivate their desired spiritual ends. And yet, as demonstrated by their confusion over whether material prosperity was a sign of God's favor or a sign of spiritual corruption, they had some residual sense that the material world was connected to the spiritual world. They just weren't sure how.

This ambiguous understanding of the connection between the physical and spiritual enabled later writers to view American nature as God's particular revelation to his chosen nation. The Puritan colonists understood themselves as leaving the corrupt church in England and coming to the American wilds in order to recreate the church of the New Testament in its "primitive purity" (Johnson A2).<sup>3</sup> They therefore had quite a

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the attestation that John Higginson wrote for Mather's *Magnalia*, he praises Mather's work because it shows how the Puritans worked to reestablish the primitive, faithful church: For by this *Essay* it may be seen, that a *farther Practical Reformation* than that which began at the first coming out of the Darkness of *Popery*, was aimed at, and endeavoured

high view of their role in divine history, and this perception gradually helped turn the “drear and howling wilderness” to which the early colonists thought they had come into a religious sphere where God works out his covenant with the “New-English Israel” (Thoreau, *A Week* 323; Mather, *Magnalia* 121). According to Sacvan Bercovitch, “the American *wilderness* takes on the double significance of secular and sacred place. If for the individual believer it remained part of the wilderness of the world, for God’s ‘peculiar people’ it was a territory endowed with special symbolic import, like the wilderness through which the Israelites passed to the promised land” (*Jeremiad* 15).<sup>4</sup> As Bercovitch explains elsewhere regarding the natural philosophy of the Puritans’ descendents, “the concept of the creation as *figura* is a Christian commonplace. What distinguishes both Mather and Edwards is that they invoke the *figura* with a specific federal eschatology in mind” (*Puritan Origins* 155). Early texts simply saw God’s character revealed in his creation—for example Anne Bradstreet’s seventeenth-century “Contemplations” (167–74)—but later Puritans—for instance Mather in *Christian Philosopher* (1721) and Jonathan Edwards in *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (c. 1728)—view America’s natural world as providing a particular revelation for God’s New England church.

Aided by the European Romantic movement, this idea expanded in nineteenth-century America, leading many to see the natural environment not as the “*Devil’s Territories*” but, in John Muir’s terms, as “God’s wildness.” Rather than being opposed

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by a great Number of *Voluntary Exiles*, that came into a *Wilderness* for that very end, that hence they might be free from humane *Additions* and *Inventions* in the Worship of God, and might practice the *positive part* of *Divine Institutions*, according to the Word of God. (*Magnalia* 70)

<sup>4</sup> Cernich makes a similar argument, claiming that over the course of American history “the meaning of ‘wilderness’ itself was transformed—evacuated of its pejorative meaning, as indicative of social and spiritual chaos, and reinvested with the character of an ennobling, worthy, and ultimately salvific adversary” (2).



to God's errand, the American wilderness now becomes intimately connected with the success of this errand. Bercovitch quotes from Margaret Fuller and Thomas Cole to describe the potent mythology of American nature: "'Marked by God' for man's 'most magnificent dwelling place,' the New World provided the 'conclusive proof' of the 'perpetuity and destiny of our sacred Union,' and so enabled the viewer to 'see far into futurity.' Its natural wonders, truly perceived, were oracles of the 'new order . . . to be'" (*Puritan Origins* 152). Perry Miller traces the remarkable extent to which nineteenth-century American Christians latched onto this notion of Nature as God's agent of revelation and redemption: "Nature had somehow . . . effectually taken the place of the Bible; by her unremitting influence, she would guide aright the faltering steps of a young republic" (*Nature's Nation* 203). While their Puritan forebears would not have countenanced this elevation of Nature to the status of Scripture, the Puritan understanding of their privileged role in divine history helped prepare the way for this reevaluation of American nature. By the nineteenth century, the Puritans' attempt to found a primitive, pure church had become transposed into an effort to found a new nation on its uniquely primitive, pure wilderness. How Americans were supposed to live from this supposedly primitive wilderness was a question that proponents of this view typically overlooked, with the consequence that they marveled at the beauty of God's creation while making fortunes from its destruction.

So although the idea that careful observation of the natural world, and particularly the American natural world, could reveal God's character did not blossom in America until the early nineteenth century, its seeds are located in the Puritan view of America's role in redemptive history. The Puritans' latent dualism, and their lack of clarity

regarding how the physical realm participated in the spiritual realm, thus led to competing views of the American natural environment: either it was the “*Devil’s Territories*” to be exploited, or it was God’s primitive revelation to his chosen nation. Neither of these views leads to particularly sustainable human economies. Combined, they lead to the schizophrenia typical of America’s treatment of the environment: we set aside parts of our country as National Parks and wilderness areas, and we destroy other parts via mountaintop removal coal mining. Americans remain deeply conflicted about how the physical world might relate to God. This confusion may always be a possibility in Christian theology, which teaches that creation is good but fallen. In American history, this confusion manifests itself in the competing views that the created world is fallen and under the control of the devil, and that it retains its primitive, created goodness.

This Puritan dualism has had profound effects on the ways that Americans have perceived and used the natural environment. It underlies Lynn White’s claim in his seminal essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” that Christianity was a prime cause of the environmental crisis. It helps to explain Harold Bloom’s observation that American religion has a distinctly Gnostic caste (31–46). It structures the dialectic between nature and industry that Leo Marx, in *The Machine in the Garden*, traces through American literature. It has led many environmentalists and ecocritics to dismiss the Judeo-Christian tradition and either reject religion entirely or look to other forms of religion for the possibility of ecological renewal. But despite the Puritan’s confusion over how the physical and spiritual worlds were connected, their efforts to draw spiritual insight from the physical creation reflected their faith that these spheres were connected.

And from this belief developed an American literary tradition that imagines more complex, sustainable ways for humans to live with the rest of creation.

At the beginning of *The Christian Philosopher*, Mather articulates a view of the physical world that neither puts it in competition with spiritual ends—which justifies exploiting and conquering “the *Devil’s Territories*”—nor identifies it with a spiritual revelation—which justifies preserving parts of wilderness but offers little guidance about how humans should conduct their daily lives—but rather portrays humans as occupying a particular role within a physical creation that participates in God’s spiritual life:

THE essays now before us will demonstrate, that *Philosophy* [by which he means natural philosophy or science] is no *Enemy*, but a mighty and wondrous *Incentive to Religion*. . . . In the *Dispositions and Resolutions* of PIETY thus enkindled, a *Man* most effectually *shews himself a MAN*, and with unutterable Satisfaction answers the grand END of his Being, which is, *To glorify GOD*. He discharges also the Office of a *Priest* for the *Creation*, under the Influences of an admirable Saviour, and therein asserts and assures his Title unto that *Priesthood*, which the Blessedness of the *future State* will very much consist in being advanced to. The whole *World* is indeed a *Temple* of GOD, *built and fill’d* by that Almighty *Architect*; and in this *Temple*, every such one, affecting himself with the Occasions for it, will *speak of His Glory*. (*Christian Philosopher* 7)

Mather’s introduction contains the seeds that later authors would develop as they imagined how Americans might practically fulfill their divine end in this wild temple. First, Mather proposes that humans show proper gratitude to God by appreciating the way that all of his creation glorifies him. This implies that wild creation, uncultivated by humans, participates in God’s glory, and that one of humanity’s tasks is to attentively study God’s creation. Second, Mather states that this study of nature enables one to discharge the “Office of a *Priest* for the *Creation*.” What exactly this means Mather does not fully explain, but he does say that how well humans act as priests here on earth will affect the blessedness of their future state in heaven. Finally, Mather portrays this office

of priesthood as open to everyone; all should speak of the divine glory that is revealed in creation. This priestly role is the way humans ought to participate in the glory that the wild creation naturally renders to its Creator.

Mather's view of creation as God's temple, within which we are responsible for facilitating God's worship, contains an alternative to the Puritans' dualism, and his understanding of humans as priests in God's wild creation fired the imaginations of many later American authors. These writers were troubled by the wanton natural destruction caused in part by seeing spirit and matter in competition, and yet they were also troubled by simplistic and nationalistic views of wild nature as God's primitive revelation. In opposition to these religious views, authors such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Willa Cather, and Wendell Berry draw on the American religious tradition that Mather articulates here. They want to understand the order God desires in his created temple and what their priestly role is within this order. While each of these four authors imagines the human place in God's creation in different terms, they share two key insights:

1. God's redemptive work in creation is ongoing. God did not simply create the world and then walk away; rather, he continues to guide and direct creation's natural processes toward his loving ends. Thus the created order may be fallen, but its maker remains committed to restoring its original, loving order.
2. Humans have a responsibility to participate in God's redemptive work. Rather than pursue their own selfish ends, humans must learn to make their lives and work align with God's. Yet they must remember that their work never accomplishes redemption but only participates in the redemption that God is bringing about.

The four authors in this study, and the broader tradition of which they are a part, agree with Mather that all creation glorifies God and, like humans, is “under the Influences of an admirable Saviour.” Wild creation, then, is not the devil’s territories but rather God’s redemptive, loving household. Because humans should submit to God’s “grand END,” people should never think their “*main End*” is to catch fish or reorder the natural environment to human ends. God’s redemption, then, is not a fish being “redeemed” by becoming a piece of silver in some fisherman’s pocket, it is not some creature being made useful in a human economy, and it is not worshiping the temple rather than the Creator. Instead, God is able to effect his redemption when humans fulfill their proper place within his wild household or *oikos*. The authors examined in this study do not imagine humans as separate from the environment, which can lead either to seeing the natural world as a foe—the devil’s territories—or a friend—God’s special revelation—but not as something within which they have a particular role to play. In attempting to follow this insight, I avoid the term “environment” because that word can mean simply the surroundings against which human actions are set. Rather, I use the word ecology in its etymological sense, to connote a household within which we live with the rest of God’s creatures. The order of this household includes what are often separated out into spiritual and material categories. By thinking in such terms, these four authors seek to imagine the ecology or economy of God’s wild household and then how to fulfill the human place in this loving order. They probe the inconsistent religious attitudes toward the created world that they inherited and develop a clearer understanding of the relation between spiritual ends and physical means. In this way, they extend the

Puritan errand and imagine what it would look like for a people to act as priests within God's original, loving *oikos*.

Despite this rich tradition, many environmental historians and literary critics continue to overlook the Christian influence on America's environmental movement, perhaps because Lynn White's thesis continues to exert an outsized influence or because religion does not seem appropriate within the scientific discourse of ecology.<sup>5</sup> Greg Garrard's attitude in *Ecocriticism* is quite typical; he is skeptical about the value to environmentalism of any religious perspective, but is particularly dismissive of Christianity's "problematic," "other-worldly" metaphysic (176). Recently, however, in conjunction with the broader growth of postsecularism, some have begun to rectify this omission, recognizing that American environmentalism in particular is profoundly religious. This move toward religion can upset some environmentalists because, as Thomas Dunlap explains, they "do not, generally, believe the movement constitutes a religion (and in conventional terms it does not), and they are uncomfortable with religious terms, but they ask religious questions: what purpose do humans have in the universe, and what must they do to fulfill it?" (13). William Cronon concurs: "[Environmentalism] offers a complex series of moral imperatives for ethical action, and judges human conduct accordingly. The source of these imperatives may not appear quite so metaphysical as in other religious traditions, but it in fact derives from the whole of creation as the font not just of ethical direction but of spiritual insight" ("Forward"

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of White's impact in ecological discourse and a lengthy response to his claims, see Fred Van Dyke (particularly 15–16 and 133–36), Alister McGrath (particularly xv and 29–30), and Richard Bauckham (14–62). Van Dyke sees the Industrial Revolution as the greater cause of the shift in Western attitudes toward nature (95–121), and McGrath locates this shift within Enlightenment philosophy (53–76).

xi).<sup>6</sup> The growth of environmentalism, whatever else it might be, is also a religious phenomenon.

Recognizing the functionally religious character of environmentalism has led to an examination of the religious sources of America's contemporary environmental movement. Two weaknesses remain, however, in the religious scholarship on American environmental attitudes. First, many of these scholars study Eastern, Native American, or New Age religions to the neglect of Christianity. For instance, Bron Taylor, in *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, focuses on animistic and Gaian forms of spirituality rather than organized religions (13–41).<sup>7</sup> These are certainly valuable and important topics of study, and the focus of this study is not intended to challenge them but to complement them; given the historical prominence of Christianity in America, critics will fail to understand the religious attitudes toward nature expressed in American history and literature if they overlook Christianity. Second, environmental critics who consider religion often do so with little respect for theology. Many approach religion as activists who want to convince religious people to become environmentalists, but they do not want to consider how religion could, and perhaps should, shape our understanding of the natural environment. For instance, Roger Gottlieb explains that environmentalists need to couch their arguments in religious terms because “for many people religious beliefs provide primary values concerning our place in the universe”

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Nelson comes to a similar conclusion, arguing “The distinctive feature of the contemporary environmental movement . . . is . . . its rethinking of the basic relationship between human beings and nature—a central topic of religion for thousands of years” (3). Timothy Morton also recognizes that environmentalism has taken the form of a religion and thus seeks to abandon it in favor of his supposedly irreligious ecology (*Ecological Thought* 1, 6–8).

<sup>7</sup> Examples of these types of studies include Catherine Albanese's *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*, Alan Hodder's *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, and Michael Cohen's *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*.

(Gottlieb 11). While Gottlieb goes on to offer other reasons for environmentalists to cooperate with religious people, he seems content for activists to simply dress up their causes in religious rhetoric in order to gain more public support; this is a form of what David Albertson critiques as a “therapeutic model” of ecotheology or what, in another context, Wilson Brissett calls “vampire theology” (Albertson 8–9; Brissett 58).<sup>8</sup> This is a standard academic approach; as Stanley Fish recently pointed out, most scholars do not take religion seriously: “To take religion seriously would be to regard it not as a phenomenon to be analyzed at arm’s length, but as a candidate for the truth.”<sup>9</sup> Some cultural critics, most notably Bill McKibben, do take a more serious look at the religious character of American environmentalism.<sup>10</sup> This approach should be pursued in literature also, because much of America’s most influential environmental literature was written by people who took religion seriously as a candidate for truth. Reading their texts from a theological perspective, then, is a way of respecting the integrity of their work and understanding more fully the American environmental imagination.

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<sup>8</sup> This “therapeutic model” is precisely the approach E. O. Wilson takes in *The Creation*, which he writes in the form of a letter to a Baptist pastor. Wilson attempts to merely sweep the metaphysical differences between the pastor and himself under the rug in order to work together on preserving creation (*The Creation* 167–68), but he refuses to consider that metaphysical differences might have very real effects on how people live, thus begging the question of theology’s importance. Max Oelschlaeger demonstrates a genuine willingness to learn from religion, but despite his claim that “*There are no solutions for the systemic causes of ecocrisis, at least in democratic societies, apart from religious narrative,*” he at times emphasizes “*solidarity*” among different religions at the expense of genuine dialogue (*Caring for Creation* 5, 8).

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Buell warns about the pitfalls of this academic approach to religion, particularly in the context of America: “Like it or not, there is no getting rid of religion as a force in human affairs. If you think it’s nothing more than the opiate of others, you’re likely to misunderstand yourself as well as them. Especially if you’re trying to come to terms with so religiocentric a culture as the United States was in the early nineteenth century—and indeed still is” (*Emerson* 159–60).

<sup>10</sup> In several recent essays, McKibben has written about the rise of environmental awareness among American Christians, and he places great importance on this because “for the foreseeable future this will be a “Christian” nation. The question is, what kind of Christian nation?” (“Christian Paradox”). See also his essay on the Evangelical Climate Initiative for his analysis of the burgeoning Christian environmental movement (“Will Evangelicals”).



Recently, some literary critics have begun to recognize the importance of religion in American environmental literature. John Gatta's excellent survey, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, impressively demonstrates the scope and quality of "this still-unidentified body of American expression I presume to call religious environmental literature" (12). This body of literature is still "unidentified" because, as Gatta points out, most ecocritics overlook the "religious sense of wonder" that pervades "much of the primary literature it addresses" within the American literary canon (*Making Nature* 12). Ecocriticism must rectify this neglect, for as Lawrence Buell concludes in his recent essay "Religion and the Environmental Imagination in American Literature," "however much religion is repressed or theorized out of existence by western intellectual discourse, its resources will still be needed and called upon . . . to conceptualize humankind's relation to the nonhuman" ("Religion" 235).

"the pervasiveness of religious tropes and rhetoric in U.S. environmental writing is conspicuous and remarkable" ("Religion" 219).

In his brief article, Buell suggests that at least in the context of American literature, environmental criticism will struggle to theorize a compelling ecological ethic without giving careful consideration to Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

McKibben, Gatta, and Buell all recognize, however, that American Christianity has a deeply ambivalent track record with regard to the environment. As is probably clear from the Puritan texts cited above, critics who are concerned about the destructive attitude Americans have toward the natural world have reason to be leery about

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<sup>11</sup> Another excellent resource on this subject is Benjamin Webb's book of interviews with thinkers, authors, and activists who advocate religious approaches to preserving the environment.

embracing America's Christian roots. In what is certainly the best work on the subject, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, Mark Stoll traces the historical unfolding of the Puritan confusion regarding the relationship between spirit and matter, between divine ends and physical means. He claims that Protestant Christianity shaped the development of both American capitalism and the American environmental movement: "One might say that green and Green – money and ecology, capitalist development and environmental protection – are Protestantism's double legacy" (*Protestantism* x).<sup>12</sup> The story he tells explains "how Americans conquered a continent while they praised God in its groves" (*Protestantism* 7). Stoll's book is invaluable for the light it sheds on some of the apparent contradictions in American attitudes toward the environment. The present study seeks, rather, to further the work done by critics like Gatta and Buell by shifting the focus from this central confusion to examine four key literary figures—Henry Thoreau, John Muir, Willa Cather, and Wendell Berry—who recognized this dualistic tension and sought to imagine more consistent, sustainable ways of understanding the relationships between God, humans, and the rest of creation.

This study, then, has both historical and theoretical justifications. Historically, Christian theology has profoundly formed the way Americans imagine their relationship to the natural world. These imaginative ways of uniting spiritual ends with physical means, of understanding the proper human role within God's created order, form a

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Nelson develops a very similar argument regarding contemporary American culture in his book, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion Versus Environmental Religion in Contemporary America*, and both he and Dunlap agree with Stoll that American environmentalism remains deeply Protestant. Nelson states that the current "environmental religion" is "derived (to a much greater degree than many of [its] followers are aware) from Christian sources" (xiii). And Dunlap concurs that "Environmentalism's rhetorical strategies, points of view, and ways of thought remain embedded in this evangelical Protestant heritage, which forms the unacknowledged ground of many environmental attitudes and arguments" (167).

fascinating and as yet untold story about how Americans have responded to their troubled Puritan legacy. In addition, though, this story may shed light on some of the theoretical difficulties facing the burgeoning ecocritical movement in literary studies. Ecocriticism, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii; Buell, *Future* 11–13), has morphed and developed rapidly during the first twenty years of its existence. In certain interesting ways, its secularized development parallels the confused religious dualism that has troubled the broader American culture.

While environmental criticism has a rich history, the institutional birth of ecocriticism can be located in 1992 when The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established at a Western Literature Association conference (Cohen, “Blues in the Green” 13). As suggested by ASLE’s roots in Western American literature, ecocriticism’s early years focused on texts that portrayed the American wilderness in rather romantic terms. Like those Americans who saw nature as God’s revelation to his special nation, early ecocritics looked to nature for a clear standard by which they could critique anthropocentric, capitalist culture. Reacting against the perceived excesses of postmodern theory, this first wave did little to challenge the view “(1) that nature, which is refreshingly simple, is good; and (2) that culture, which is tiresomely convoluted, is bad” (Phillips 3). Even as the movement developed and ecocritical discourse began to engage more rigorously with ecology and to nuance its view of nature in light of postmodern critiques, the assumption remained that primitive nature represented an ideal order. The human role within such a paradigm remains rather ambiguous, but most critics who are sympathetic to this sort of deep ecology turn to

science for guidance. Glen Love, for instance, explains that because humans, “like all other creatures, evolved, body and brain,” the “life sciences” offer the best means by which we can find out “what it means to be human” (6).<sup>13</sup> So although Love acknowledges that human perception of the biosphere is culturally refracted, he draws on scientists like E. O. Wilson to argue that biology and ecology provide the most powerful ways of understanding nature—including human nature—and thus should form our ethical and cultural discourses (26).<sup>14</sup>

Yet at the same time that these ecocritics tried to understand ecology as some primitive, pure order in which humans naturally belong, they inevitably proposed ethics based on extra-material standards. Since these critics wanted to halt environmental exploitation, they sought to develop an ethic of general affection, and yet such an ethic proves quite difficult to derive from scientific study of ecological systems. So like their predecessors whose interpretation of God’s pure revelation to his chosen nation was always inflected by their preconceived notions of what this revelation should contain (often a warrant for individual freedoms or Manifest Destiny), environmental thinkers who ostensibly base their ethics solely on ecology end up bringing in other cultural or metaphysical beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Near the end of *Consilience*, E. O. Wilson claims that biology

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<sup>13</sup> Luc Ferry criticizes this belief while ruling that “it is probably in the area of ecology that the feeling that the natural sciences will delive[r] *ready-made* teachings applicable to ethics and politics seems to be most confidently asserted” (84). He argues that humans are distinct from other beings because of their ability to make moral choices (40–45).

<sup>14</sup> For a defense on Humean grounds of this move from *is* to *ought*, see Callicott (*In Defense of the Land Ethic* 117–27). Even if one grants Callicott his argument (which remains problematic to the extent that Hume’s ethics are problematic), he only concludes that ecological science can “change . . . what we value, not how we value” (*In Defense of the Land Ethic* 127). Thus the “ought” he ends up with remains quite vague. See also Callicott’s “Just the Facts, Ma’am” and “Can a Theory of Moral Sentiments Support a Genuinely Normative Environmental Ethic?” (*Beyond the Land Ethic* 79–98, 99–116).

<sup>15</sup> William Cronon provides a clear explanation of the fundamental ways in which wilderness is a cultural, “human creation” (“The Trouble with Wilderness” 7).

can explain ethics and that they “are no more than . . . the behavioral codes that members of a society fervently wish others to follow and are willing to accept themselves for the common good” (*Consilience* 273). Yet, contrary to his assertion here, Wilson’s own ethical principles arise not from biology but from his belief in “consilience,” which he earlier admits is his own “metaphysical world view” (*Consilience* 9). Thus critics from Alister McGrath to Lawrence Buell have pointed out that Wilson’s genetic “biophilia” does not provide a purely biological foundation for altruism (McGrath 180–82; Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 386). Accordingly, scholars who claim to derive an environmental ethic from ecology ultimately do so on the basis of some cultural or metaphysical belief—such as “biophilia” or “benevolence” (E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia* 139; Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic* 115)—although they usually attempt to conceal this extra-material basis under the auspices of progressive cultural theory.<sup>16</sup>

Timothy Morton is one of the few ecocritics who recognizes that most “environmentalisms . . . have ironically strayed from materialism” (“Guest Column” 277). Combining postmodern theory (and more recently speculative realism) with ecology, Morton directly critiques deep ecologists and those who seek some normative order in nature: “Ecology can do without a concept of a something, a thing of some kind, ‘over yonder,’ called Nature.” This “Nature” connotes “hierarchy, authority, harmony, purity, neutrality, and mystery,” all ideas that Morton rejects (*Ecological Thought* 3). Instead of this nature, Morton proposes that we conceive of ourselves as existing in an

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<sup>16</sup> While it lies outside the scope of my argument, I think a case can be made that this desire to find authoritative guidance within ecology is partially inherited from American pragmatism. Roger Lundin defines this broad tradition “as an attempt to extract from experience the very standards by which that experience is then to be judged” (*From Nature to Experience* 9). Yet as Lundin demonstrates, this attempt continues to have only limited success.

ecological “mesh,” which allows us to imagine the “interconnectedness of all living and non-living things” (*Ecological Thought* 28). Such a mesh would break down all culturally contrived boundaries and enable fluid relationships “between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment” (“Guest Column” 275–76). Morton’s “dark” or “queer” ecology therefore “spawns a politicized intimacy with other beings,” or, in the words of Jacques Khalip, “an erotic passivity” (*Ecology Without Nature* 184–86; “Guest Column” 278, 280). Morton’s thought takes ecology more seriously than most ecocritics, yet by theorizing from a radical materialism, he must pose an ethic of promiscuous, open-ended desire, an ethic that can offer no restraint to individuals prone to satisfy their desires by exploiting their environment.<sup>17</sup> As Terry Eagleton remarks about the ethical dilemma Morton shares with other postmodern philosophers, “The West has long believed in moulding Nature to its own desires; it is just that it used to be known as the pioneer spirit and is nowadays known as postmodernism” (165). Eagleton’s reference to this “pioneer spirit” brings us back to the other pole of the Puritan legacy. In their deconstruction of romantic conceptions of nature, critics like Morton valorize representations of the environment that hold humans accountable to no particular ethical standard. Thus, although Morton’s ecological mesh is a radically secular and materialist concept, it leads to the same dangerous conclusion as Mather’s designation of the wilderness as “the *Devil’s Territories*”: both represent humans as free to impose whatever order they like on the natural world around them.

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<sup>17</sup> For a further analysis of Morton’s thought, see my review of *The Ecological Thought* (Bilbro, “Rev. of *The Ecological Thought*”). Greg Garrard also offers a response to Morton’s “dark ecology” (“Ecocriticism” 9–13).

So far, then, ecocriticism remains caught in the polarity that has defined so much of the troubled relationship Americans have had with this continent and the other beings with whom they share it. Either they understand their ecological obligations in simplistic ways—claiming to follow the divine revelation manifest in the primitive wild order leaves plenty of room for self-serving interpretations of this order—or they imagine themselves to be free from all ethical considerations in their ecological interactions—figuring nature as the “*Devil’s Territories*” or an ecological mesh makes human desire the sole authority or standard of action. The four authors discussed in this dissertation work to imagine an alternative to either of these extremes. Their imaginations were all formed by various strands of Christian theology, but they each found ways of going beyond the confusion that plagued the ecological imagination of earlier American Christians.

The first chapter examines the way that Henry David Thoreau adapted Puritan forms of history and natural philosophy in order to urge his neighbors to glorify and enjoy God through his works. In *Walden*, Thoreau models his settlement of Walden Pond on the original Puritan settlement at Concord, declaring his intent to “live deliberately” and find out for himself what the purpose of his life should be and how to fulfill this. For although most men “have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever,’” Thoreau finds that they still “live meanly, like ants” (*WA* 40). So when, near the end of the book, Thoreau witnesses the “Artist who made the world and me . . . still at work” in the formation of sand patterns through successive frosts and thaws, he is ecstatic and finds his purpose in attentively watching and participating in God’s ongoing work of creation (*WA* 306). Thus in his later natural history essays, Thoreau follows the example of early American

authors like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, studying ecological relationships in order to better understand the divine order that naturally brings God glory. He found a particularly instructive example in the way that birds, squirrels, and other animals spread the seeds of the plants from which they ate. Both the animals and the plants benefited from this relationship: the animals gained food and the plants scattered their seed. This understanding of mutually beneficial and delightful use, use that enables each creature to achieve the end for which they were created, informed Thoreau's interpretation of the catechismal instruction to glorify and enjoy God. As he wrote in his journal near the end of his life, "The catechism says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, which of course is applicable mainly to God as seen in his works. Yet the only account of the beautiful insects—butterflies, etc.—which God has made and set before us which the State ever thinks of spending any money on is the account of those which are injurious to vegetation!" (*HMJ* 12: 170–71; 5/1/59). Instead of always subordinating other creatures to their selfish ends, humans should seek to understand what God's purpose in his creation might be, and then work to appreciate and further those ends. Thoreau redeploys Puritan genres and language, then, as he challenges his neighbors to pay attention to and participate in God's glorious works.

John Muir, the subject of the second chapter, emigrated from Scotland when he was eleven; his father wanted to join the new Campbellite movement, also known as the Disciples of Christ, so he brought his family to America and purchased a Wisconsin farm. While Muir later rejected his father's brand of strict Christian doctrine, the Disciples' theology profoundly shaped his later writings about Yosemite and the National Parks. This theology emphasized an egalitarian church organization, the unity of all Christians,



and the work of redemption through primitive, New Testament practices, particularly baptism. When Muir began studying the glacial origins of Yosemite valley, he found a similar doctrine revealed in its wild landscape: the glaciers were composed of countless tiny water crystals, but by working in unison, they exerted incredible force and were used by God to baptize ugly rocks into landscapes of incredible beauty. Muir became even more excited about his “gospel of glaciers” when he found a live glacier in the Sierra and realized that it “is still the morning of Creation,” that God is still shaping the mountains (*JMP* 34: 2131; 34: 1989). Being in this newly-made creation redeemed and restored Muir, so he became a self-proclaimed “John the Baptist,” preaching “baptism and absolution from civilized sins” through immersion in God’s wildness (*Writings* 9: 367). When this pure, wild landscape was threatened by logging and commercial development, Muir urged his fellow Americans to participate in God’s creative work by preserving tracts of wilderness as National Parks: “Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ’s time—and long before that—God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools,—this is left to the American people” (“Save” 4). By setting aside these areas in their pure, wild state, Americans could be obedient in a way that the first humans failed to be. As Muir explained, “The smallest forest reserve, and the first I ever heard of, was in the Garden of Eden; and though its boundaries were drawn by the Lord, and embraced only one tree, yet even so moderate a reserve as this was attacked” (“The National Parks” 276). By comparing the National Parks to the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Muir figured all of America as an Eden whose inhabitants should protect these tracts of wilderness in obedience to God’s

wild order. Muir's support for wilderness preservation, then, flowed from his belief that divine redemption was manifest and available to all and that humans had to choose whether to participate in this redemption or succumb to civilized sins of greed and pride and so repeat the original fall. Muir's rhetoric proved remarkably effective in establishing and popularizing the National Parks, but his emphasis on wild nature as a divine revelation threatened to devolve into the simplistic, nationalistic eagerness to save parts of America's wilderness while treating the rest of the land pretty much like the devil's territories.

In a bold and creative move, Willa Cather draws on two New Testament antitypes to the Edenic fall—the Virgin Mary and the Garden of Gethsemane—to imagine how Americans might obediently and attentively participate in the redemptive work God wants to accomplish in each ecological community, particularly those in which different cultures and species struggle to coexist. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a legend based on two Catholic, French missionaries in the nineteenth-century American southwest, Cather contrasts prideful individuals who pursue their own selfish ends at the expense of the other members in their community with obedient humans who actively seek God's ends. Like Adam and Eve, whose desire to become like God brought death on both themselves and the rest of creation, some characters fail to submit to God's loving order. Cather's two priestly protagonists, however, model their work as missionaries and gardeners after a different set of biblical examples. Like Mary, they obediently submit to God's redemptive plan, even when they don't fully understand how the diverse cultures and species of the desert southwest can possibly be reconciled. And like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, they attentively watch and pray for God to

restore all the members of his household, even if it means they themselves will have to sacrifice their lives. As one of Cather's priests reflects near the end of the book, citing Blaise Pascal, "Man was lost and saved in a garden" (*DCA* 279). Unlike the Puritan colonists, these French priests understand that spiritual salvation cannot be divorced from physical salvation, and so they work not only to save souls, but to reconcile different species in their garden and different cultures in their diocese.

The final chapter turns to Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer who has articulately addressed these issues in essays, poems, and fiction over the past fifty years. Berry deals explicitly with America's troubled religious attitudes toward the land, and his essays offer a carefully developed theology of what he calls the "way of love." Essentially, Berry argues that humans ought to honor and participate in God's love for the world by caring for their particular places. Berry defines place in chronological, hierarchical, and geographical terms: people should care for those who have lived before them and who will live after them; they should care for God who is above them and for the animals and plants whom God has entrusted to their care; and they should care for the local community and place in which they live. Each of these contexts obliges humans to work out their love humbly and faithfully for those around them. Given their finitude and fallenness, humans will inevitably fall short in these attempts, but by staying in their place and continuing to work, they will come to better understand how to enact this love. Thus humans need to imagine how their places can more fully participate in "the Kingdom of God," a phrase Berry uses to refer to God's redemptive economy, and then to correct and improve their imaginations through faithful work. Berry's novels, all set in the same fictional Kentucky town, Port William, provide concrete portrayals of how this

way of love might be followed in our modern age. In *Jayber Crow*, the titular character learns from his tradition, particularly Dante, how to love the members of his community even when his affection seems impractical and futile. Eventually, Jayber's love enables him to pray the prayer that Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, "Thy will be done" (JC 250), even when he sees that his will and God's will are not the same, that he will have to relinquish his own wishes in order to participate in the loving order that God desires for the Port William community. In another novel, *The Memory of Old Jack*, Jack Beecham's youthful vision of a healthy farm and marriage, a healthy household, is reformed and corrected through his uneven attempts to work it out. While he often damages his land, and never ends up adequately loving his wife, Jack does learn that his love for the members of his community can only be made accountable to their actual value through humble, faithful work. Berry's way of love provides, then, a high view of the spiritual value of each member of God's household and a practical means of loving and honoring those members who live near us.

These four authors are like four notes in the same chord: they each strike a different tone, but they harmonize around the desire to submit to and participate in the redemptive order of God's household. They recognize the dualistic attitudes that have plagued American ecological relationships and that have led so many to order their lives around selfish standards of value. These four are not alone in this recognition; many other American authors wrestle with their Puritan legacy as they seek better theological paradigms to support ecological ethics. But each author in this study extends the insights of the previous generation, applying Christian theology in ever more practical ways to meet the needs of the present. Some twentieth-century writers, such as Annie Dillard,

rework Thoreauvian ideas in fascinating ways, and others, such as Aldo Leopold, develop Muir's call to protect wild places, but by selecting authors who creatively extend the work of earlier generations, this study hopes to trace the broader arc of the American, Christian ecological imagination. Their diverse approaches demonstrate how Americans from different regions and in different times apply this tradition to the meet the particular ecological challenges they saw. Thoreau and Muir tend to emphasize the divine revelation given in wild places, so they understand the human role in God's ecology as primarily perceptive and receptive, although Muir in particular emphasizes the need to protect wilderness areas. Cather and Berry concur, but perhaps because they witness more fully the destruction caused by industrialization, they are careful to avoid a romantic valuation of wild nature that stands awestruck before wild vistas and permits the exploitation of less spectacular places. Cather and Berry, then, articulate different ways that we can care for the creatures with whom and from whom we live, and they propose more active ways of participating in this household. Despite these differences, each of these authors imagines practical, material means by which humans and the other members of their ecological communities can submit to and participate in God's wildness.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Watching for the Glory of God”: Thoreau’s Adaptations of Puritan History and Natural Philosophy

If it is possible that we may be addressed-it behoves us to be attentive. If by watching all day & all night-I may detect some trace of the Ineffable-then will it not be worth the while to watch? Watch & pray without ceasing. . . . If by patience, if by watching I can secure one new ray of light-can feel myself elevated for an instant upon Pisgah-the world which was dead prose to me become living & divine-shall I not watch ever-shall I not be a watchman henceforth?- If by watching a whole year on the city walls I may obtain a communication from heaven, shall I not do well to shut up my shop & turn a watchman?

(Thoreau, *PJ* 4: 53–54)

For all of Thoreau’s bluster at the beginning of *Walden* that “I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors,” he certainly immersed himself in the writings of those who came before him (9). Robert Sattelmeyer’s painstaking study of Thoreau’s reading catalogues almost 1500 books that Thoreau references in his writings. What Thoreau wanted to avoid was “timid” reading that clings to every “least traditionary expression . . . with instinctive tenacity” (*PJ* 4: 51; 9/7/51). So Thoreau reads not to learn what to think, but to spark his own imagination about how he might live his life with the proper intensity and awareness. As he explains in the same journal entry in which he condemns timid reading, “How to live- How to get the most life! . . . That is my every day business. I am as busy as a bee about it. I ramble over all the fields on that errand and am never so happy as when I feel myself heavy with honey & wax” (*PJ* 4: 53). And as the epigraph above makes clear, Thoreau’s conception of his “errand” in the fields has been formed by his reading of Puritan historians. His enthused declaration of vocation deploys biblical and particularly Puritan language: he references

Jesus' command to his disciples in Gethsemane to watch and pray all night and Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians to pray without ceasing in expectation of Christ's second coming (Mat. 26.41; I Thes. 5.17); he wishes he were on Pisgah, the mountain from which Moses first saw the Promised Land (Deut. 34.1); and he locates himself within Winthrop's oft-cited description of the Puritan settlement as "a city upon the hill" (47; cf. Matt. 5.14). These figures demonstrate the way that Thoreau reinterpreted the Puritans' theological understanding of their errand to help himself "get the most life" by being attentive to God's work.

As intellectual historians like Bercovitch and Miller have argued, the Puritan colonists and their religious historians saw the settlement of New England as part of God's plan to bring about the restoration of his church. Thus, Puritan historians invested American geography with spiritual significance as an arena in which God was accomplishing his redemptive history and ushering in his millennial kingdom. In order to give God the glory he deserved, the Puritans emphasized the need to record and publish the history of God's work in their community. In *Walden* (1854) Thoreau positions his settlement on Walden's shore as a reenactment of the original settlement of Concord, and like those settlers, his primary goal is not material wealth, but "*spiritual* bread" that will enable humans to find out for themselves how to "glorify God and enjoy him forever" (*WA* 40, 91). *Walden's* form as a Puritan history testifies to Thoreau's developing interests in early American history and to his desire to regain his place in a divine covenant in order to participate in God's coming millennial kingdom.

Puritan writers also sought to apply contemporary scientific developments to the work of natural theology; as Newtonian science proved the wisdom of Galileo's dictum

to look to God's "Book of Nature," ministers like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards applied these scientific methods to better understand how the New World wilderness also revealed God and his redemptive plan. Similarly, Thoreau's natural history writings express his hope that all of his careful collection of empirical data will help him and his neighbors to "saunter toward the Holy Land" (*Excursions* 222).<sup>1</sup> Like the Puritans, Thoreau sought to glorify God by noticing and appreciating the beauty of his ongoing work in New England. Thus in one journal entry where he laments that the "One of little faith looks for his rewards & punishments to the next world-& despairing of this world behaves accordingly in it," he calls his countrymen to attend to the beauty and goodness of New England: "Shall we never have watchmen in the country of another sort-watching for the glory of God" (*PJ* 4: 315; 2/1/52). Thoreau extended the Puritan understanding of how humans should glorify God, urging his neighbors not to despair of this world, but to increase their faith and so perceive the ways all creatures enjoy God by fulfilling the ends for which they were made. As Thoreau writes in his journal a few years before his death, we should not use science to more effectively manipulate natural resources to fulfill our own desires; instead, we should pay attention to the beauty of God's creation in order to "glorify God and enjoy him forever" (*HMJ* 12: 170; 5/1/59).

Thoreau's adaptations of American civil and natural histories demonstrate that he saw his work as a continuation of this divine errand on which his ancestors had been sent. Throughout his life, Thoreau honed his skills as a watcher for and participator in God's

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<sup>1</sup> As is clear by the nature of my claims, I follow critics like Wolf in viewing Thoreau's oeuvre as a coherent whole rather than seeing a sharp divide between *Walden* and his later writings (Wolf 119). Although his thought certainly develops and shifts, I disagree both with critics like Leo Stoller, who argue that Thoreau left *Walden* because his experiment there failed (4), and with critics like Sherman Paul who see the years after *Walden* as years of "decay" (294).



glory, and he did so in large part by using the Puritan modes of history and natural philosophy to make himself a more attentive observer of, and thus a more properly tuned participant in, God's work. He often criticized the Puritans for their constrictive doctrines, and his idiosyncratic spirituality draws not only on Puritan Christianity but also on Romanticism and Eastern philosophy, among others. Nevertheless, Thoreau's adaptations of Puritan genres—particularly history and natural philosophy—indicate his agreement with them that these imaginative modes can enable humans to better watch and participate in God's redemptive work.<sup>2</sup> So when Thoreau urges his neighbors to join him in a lifestyle attentive to how the natural world reveals higher laws, it is because he believes this will enable Americans to become members in a divine covenant that God offers to them. By taking their proper place in this covenant, Americans can stop seeing the world in terms of their own selfish desires and can instead participate in God's ongoing redemptive work and join with the rest of the created world in enjoying and glorifying God.

### *The Religious Contexts of Transcendentalism*

Several recent studies on Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists have attempted to recover the religious content of this movement from the scholarly oblivion to which it has often been consigned. In their own day, the Transcendentalist movement was predominately seen as a religious one; as Perry Miller claims, “the Transcendental movement is most accurately . . . defined as a religious demonstration”

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<sup>2</sup> For evidence of Thoreau's predominant interests in American history and natural philosophy during the 1850s see Paul and Robert Sattelmeyer (S. Paul 354; Sattelmeyer 110).

(*Transcendentalists* 8).<sup>3</sup> They attempted to respond to the complacency and dryness of rational Unitarianism while also trying to avoid the narrowness of Calvinist doctrines. Although earlier scholarship considered the religious character of the movement, as Thoreau and Emerson increasingly came to be studied as literary figures, attention to their religious thought waned. Catherine Albanese reacts to this tendency in the preface to her 1988 anthology, *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists*, when she writes “What is often forgotten, however, is that the concerns that spawned the Transcendental movement were essentially religious: the American Transcendentalists thought, wrote, spoke, and lived a distinctive spirituality” (vii).<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Buell makes a similar observation, pointing out that Perry Miller’s 1967 anthology, *The Transcendentalists*, includes sections titled “Miracles” and “The Movement: *Philosophical and Religious*,” but that the selections in Joel Myerson’s 2000 *Transcendentalism: A Reader* downplay the religious thought of these writers in favor of their political, social, and literary contributions (*Emerson* 159).

A correction to this overly secular view of the Transcendentalists seems to be underway. In a 2007 essay, Joe Fulton musters extensive textual evidence to demonstrate that the Transcendentalists saw their movement as a “rebirth” or “reformation” of Puritan antecedents (388–96). The divisions in the 2010 *Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism* still emphasize the movement’s “social” and “literary” elements, but the editors include essays on “Religion,” “Asian Influences,” “Puritanism,” “Unitarianism,” and “Sermons”

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<sup>3</sup> Frothingham, for instance, devotes a chapter of his history of Transcendentalism to its religious character (184–217).

<sup>4</sup> For Albanese’s full assessment of the religious character of the movement, see her book *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America*.

(Myerson, Petrulionis, and Walls). Two recent book-length studies of Thoreau in particular have focused on the religious aspects of his thought. Alan Hodder's *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* pushes back against "the tendency . . . to construe his texts in some restrictively 'literary sense, the preserve mostly of literary scholars or historians operating within departments of English literature or American Studies'" and instead explores Thoreau's writings in the context of his "lived religion," his particular ecstatic or mystical religious experiences (2–3). Malcom Young takes a similar stance on the importance of understanding Thoreau's religious thought: "Despite [claims that Thoreau is secular], it would be hard to understand the transcendentalism that supported Thoreau's experience of nature without referring to eighteenth and early nineteenth century Protestant spirituality" (5).<sup>5</sup> So his book traces how Thoreau creatively developed his understanding of journaling, perceiving, and walking from his Protestant tradition.

The different approaches that Hodder and Young follow in their books are indicative of a larger split within criticism on Thoreau's religious thought: some, like Hodder, see his spirituality as a departure from the New England Puritan tradition and others, like Young, see Thoreau as creatively extending this tradition. This split in the scholarship mirrors Thoreau's own bifurcated attitude to his native religious tradition, so both approaches yield important insight into his writings and his thought. William Wolf, in one of the best studies of Thoreau's faith, notes the diverse streams of thought that blended in Transcendentalism and argues that for Thoreau, this eclectic mix remained

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<sup>5</sup> John Gatta provides an extensive list of essays and books on Thoreau's religious thought (*Making Nature Sacred* 263–64 n. 5).

organized by his native, Puritan tradition (34–35, 18).<sup>6</sup> Thus, while the reading of Thoreau that follows emphasizes the way he adapts Puritan modes of history and natural philosophy as he challenged his contemporaries to see and participate in God’s glorious works, this is not intended to minimize his significant departures from and additions to his native tradition. Scholars such as Arthur Christy and Arthur Versluis, who elucidate the influence that Asian thought had on Thoreau, particularly in the 1830s and 40s, provide important insights into the heady religious ideas that blossomed into Transcendentalism.<sup>7</sup> Yet this strand of Thoreauvian criticism oftentimes overstates his departure from his native tradition; while Thoreau’s religious thinking assimilates many different traditions, he was deeply formed by the religious and cultural context in which he grew up.<sup>8</sup> To be clear, this study is not interested in the question of what beliefs Thoreau held—that is likely unanswerable and not very useful. Rather, in order to understand how his religious thought shaped his ecological ethics, the following analysis aims to trace the imaginative paradigm that undergirds his writings. To accomplish this goal, it makes sense to start with Thoreau’s native tradition and seek to discover the ways in which, as Miller argues, the Transcendental “flowering of New England had its roots in the soil” (*Errand* 187).

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<sup>6</sup> Some scholars see Romanticism as the dominant strand in Thoreau’s thought that ties these other influences together. Thus Adams and Ross claim that in the early 1850s Thoreau experienced a “conversion to romanticism” (9).

<sup>7</sup> See particularly Versluis, *American Transcendentalism* (79–99) and Christy *The Orient* (185–234).

<sup>8</sup> Despite Thoreau’s continual engagement with Christian thought, some critics refuse to notice this. Thus a scholar like Robert Milder claims that Thoreau “had no interest in Christianity of any sort”(370).

Explicating the ways that Thoreau inherits his native tradition, however, has proven difficult. Following Miller's argument, in 1940, that Emerson's mode of transcendental perception developed the "Calvinist doctrine of regeneration" (*Errand* 190), several scholars have tried to articulate the ways that Transcendentalists drew upon their New England Puritan tradition. Miller focuses on how their reaction against the Unitarians led them to turn back to the spiritual energy of the earlier Calvinists and become "[m]ystics . . . no longer inhibited by dogma" (*Errand* 203, cf. 192).<sup>9</sup> Subsequent work by critics such as Bercovitch, Mason I. Lowance, John Gatta, Frank Shuffelton, and others has expanded our understanding of the links between Thoreau and Puritan notions of the self, symbolism, perception, and conversion. Other critics, like Young, provide helpful insights into Thoreau's writing by focusing not on philosophical similarities between Thoreau and the Puritans, but on how he inherits Puritan forms of living and writing, particularly in his journals.<sup>10</sup> Wolf, Shuffelton, and Stanley Cavell follow this approach when they describe Thoreau as a biblical prophet in the line of his Puritan forebears (Wolf 79, 86, 126; Shuffelton 47; Cavell 10, 18). And Joan Burbick

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, as Wolf has shown, when Miller examines Thoreau more specifically, he quotes him out of context and fails to see how Thoreau fits within his broader claims about Transcendentalism (Miller, *Consciousness* 33–35; Wolf 20–25).

<sup>10</sup> Bercovitch, speaking of the Transcendental subject that mediates between redemptive history and current affairs, claims, "Thoreau himself . . . bypassed the natural supernaturalism of his European contemporaries for that of his Puritan New England predecessors (including Cotton Mather)" (*Puritan Origins* 162). Lowance is careful to note that, as Miller also admits, there is no evidence that Emerson or Thoreau read Edwards directly, but he nevertheless finds "a line of continuity between Edwards, Emerson, and Thoreau: the epistemological science of perceiving Nature and the symbolic expression of that perception" (278). Gatta emphasizes how Thoreau applies contemporary developments in biblical hermeneutics to his reading of nature in *Walden* (*Making Nature Sacred* 133–42). Shuffelton critiques Miller's understanding of Puritanism as too monolithic, noting "Miller had a valid point, albeit a difficult one to make convincingly" (38–39). He does agree, however, that Edwards and Emerson share a similar conception of grace as a gift that "makes it possible to see the beauty of the world with new eyes or a new sense" (43). Most recently Andrea Knutson has examined how Emerson and William James inherit Puritan notions of conversion and perception, or what she calls a "conductive imaginary" (4).

similarly positions Thoreau as a historian in the Puritan mode: “Stemming from the Puritan tradition in New England was the belief that history was the ground of sacred reality. . . . American geography was the place of both history and prophecy” (2–3). Thus she argues, “The Puritan mission to record and give account of historical time is as present in Thoreau’s writings as in those of Cotton Mather” (10).<sup>11</sup> Given Sattelmeyer’s evidence about Thoreau’s extensive reading in the “local and regional history of New England,” and in early American “natural histories” (41–43, 90–92, 110), it seems important to extend the work of scholars like Burbick and to trace the particular ways that Thoreau used these Puritan genres and the religious ideas that formed them. While Burbick focuses on the political and social implications of this mode of history, the following analysis foregrounds how Thoreau drew on its religious traits and how this religious understanding of history motivated and directed his close attention to the ecology of New England.

### *Thoreau’s Conflicted Attitude toward New England’s Past*

The Transcendentalist disdain of history as stale and their turn to the present and to the direct experience of Nature logically follow from the Puritan belief that God was accomplishing his redemptive plan through the New England church; our present story, they thought, is the capstone of divine history. This led the Puritans to emphasize the present as the moment of divine revelation. Even so, the Transcendentalist attitude toward the past continues to be misunderstood as a simple rejection of tradition.

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Cernich also places Thoreau in this tradition and argues there are structural similarities between Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* and Thoreau’s *Walden*, although his particular argument is hampered by his admission that Thoreau didn’t read this text until 1856 and by Cernich’s rather general claims (151).

Emerson lays the groundwork for this misconception in his bold introduction to *Nature*, the Transcendentalist manifesto:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? (*Complete* 1: 7)

At first blush, this passage seems to discard the history of the foregoing generations in favor of a direct revelation from nature's "floods of life." Yet, as Buell points out, "even the radical program for an 'original relation' is grounded in the precedent of the founders. . . . [T]he position is illogical (how can a recapturing, a 'we also' mode of aspiration, be 'original'?) but understandable" (*New England* 202). Buell explains Emerson's position by arguing that Emerson "differentiate[s] sharply between Puritanism as empirical phenomenon and Puritanism as symbol," which is why he will sometimes condemn their "obstinacy" and other times "invok[e] the founders as a symbol of the ideal" (*New England* 203).

Their complex understanding of the Puritans has led to much confusion over the Transcendentalists' attitude toward the past. The Transcendentalists, in reacting against what Emerson called "corpse-cold Unitarianism" (*Heart of Emerson's Journals* 218), admired the Puritans' fervor in seeking spiritual truth "face to face," while mourning the "faded wardrobe" their moral legacy had become. It is this pious fervor that Miller describes in his claim regarding the Transcendental inheritance from Puritanism, "What is persistent from the covenant theology . . . to Edwards and to Emerson is the Puritan's

effort to confront, face to face, the image of a blinding divinity in the physical universe” (*Errand* 185).<sup>12</sup> This is the desire Emerson expresses in the opening lines of *Nature*, to see “God and nature” with the same directness and intensity with which the nation’s founders had.

Given this intellectual environment, it is not surprising that Thoreau expressed a complex attitude toward his New England past; while he scorned those who timidly sought to live in the orthodoxies of the past and who were afraid to obey “the natural laws of genius” (*PJ* 4: 314), he greatly admired the pioneers who settled New England out of a sincere commitment to a divine calling. In one journal entry he links the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints with both God and wilderness: “a wild man is a willed man. . . . The perseverance of the saints is positive willedness-not a mere passive willingness. . .-& the Almighty is wild above all” (*PJ* 5: 457–58; 1/27/53). This is the “Almighty” willedness that Thoreau wants to learn from the Calvinist settlers.

Thoreau articulates this attitude perhaps most clearly in “A Plea for Captain John Brown” where he commends Brown for actually embodying Puritan ideals:

[John Brown] was one of that class of whom we hear a great deal, but, for the most part, see nothing at all-the Puritans. . . . They were a class that did something else than celebrate their forefathers’ day, and eat parched corn in remembrance of that time. They were neither Democrats nor Republicans, but men of simple habits, straightforward, prayerful; not thinking much of rulers who did not fear God, not making many compromises, nor seeking after available candidates. (*RP* 113–14)

Like Emerson in the opening lines of *Nature*, Thoreau excoriates his contemporaries who honor their Puritan ancestors while leading conservative, complacent lives. Thoreau admires people, like Brown, who adopt the Puritan’s uncompromising piety themselves

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<sup>12</sup> Even Knutson, who disagrees with much of what Miller argues about the Puritans, agrees with Miller on the centrality of pious passion to the Puritan experience (17–18).



and thus live bold, pioneering lives. He explains to his audience that he and the other abolitionists who admire Brown “aspire to be something more than stupid and timid chattels, pretending to read history and our bibles, but desecrating every house and every day we breathe in” (*RP* 117). As Thoreau’s remarks about Brown indicate, he has great respect for the Puritans, but only scorn for those who pretend to respect the Puritans yet are merely “stupid and timid chattels.” Thus, when Emerson calls Thoreau “a born protestant” in his eulogy for him, he was complimenting him for his dedication in “aiming at a much more comprehensive calling, the art of living well” (*Lectures* 452). It is this Puritan earnestness in living well, whatever the cost, to which Thoreau was attracted, and he had no qualms in condemning the Puritans or their descendents when he felt they failed to live up to this ideal.

Thoreau’s criticisms of the English settlers are particularly revealing in the places where he sometimes compares them to their French contemporaries. When he does this, he typically makes fun of the English for their poor backwoods skills and their obsession with commercial success while still admiring their earnest energy and high ideals. In his account of his trip to Canada, *A Yankee in Canada*, Thoreau initially praises the English: “The English did not come to America from a mere love of adventure, nor to truck with or convert the savages, nor to hold offices under the crown, as the French to a great extent did, but to live in earnest and with freedom” (*Excursions* 134). Whatever the accuracy of his history, Thoreau’s approval of the English for applying their “energy” to higher ends soon turns to condemnation, because they too often allowed this energy to be misdirected from God to money: “So far as inland discovery was concerned, the adventurous spirit of the English was that of sailors who land but for a day, and their

enterprise the enterprise of traders” (*Excursions* 135). So while Thoreau praises the English for their enthusiasm, this energy was easily misdirected from freely worshipping God to earnestly turning a profit. At least the French, Thoreau thinks, have not become fixated on gaining wealth.<sup>13</sup>

He makes a similar comparison between the two nationalities in *Cape Cod*, a work he also started around 1850 but didn’t finish before his death. In his discussion of the Pilgrims, he criticizes their lack of survival skills and their failure to explore the new world as thoroughly as the French did, yet he concludes, “Nevertheless, the Pilgrims were pioneers, and the ancestors of pioneers, in a far grander enterprise” (*Cape* 202). Thoreau doesn’t identify precisely what this “far grander enterprise” is, but from his reference to the Pilgrims at the beginning of his journey, it seems to be a spiritual one. At the beginning of the book, Thoreau sees the remains of a recent shipwreck and compares its dead passengers to the early settlers:

Why care for these dead bodies? . . . Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did, they were within a mile of its shores; but, before they could reach it, they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal and convincing evidence—though it has not yet been discovered by science—than Columbus had of this; not merely mariners’ tales and some paltry drift-wood and sea-weed, but a continual drift and instinct to all our shores. I saw their empty hulks that came to land; but they themselves, meanwhile, were cast upon some shore yet further west, toward which we are all tending. (*Cape* 10)

It is this newer world—undiscoverable by science—that the Pilgrims sought, and while Thoreau makes fun of them for the clumsy way in which they settled the physical New

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<sup>13</sup> Richardson sees Thoreau’s comments in straightforward terms: “Thoreau deftly undercuts the English Puritan view of history by putting discovery ahead of colonization, and France before England” (218). I think Thoreau’s attitude is more complex than this as he praises settlers of both nationalities for different attributes.

World, he commends their earnest search for a shore yet further west. At the end of his book, then, he figures these Pilgrims as “the ancestors of pioneers” in search of this newer world when he describes their Cape Cod descendents as living not in Winthrop’s “citty upon the hill,” but in “a city on the ocean, proclaiming the rare qualities of Cape Cod Harbor” (205–06). From this vantage, they are in a position to do the pioneer work that Thoreau commends in his first book: “It is the worshipers of beauty, after all, who have done the real pioneer work of the world” (*A Week* 340). In *Cape Cod*, Thoreau admires the intensity with which the early English settlers desired to live new lives that befitted this new world. When they allowed this earnestness to be redirected to less noble enterprises, Thoreau critiqued their failure and refocused his attention on the new world itself and on the immortal world that it revealed.<sup>14</sup>

Thoreau’s complex attitude toward the Pilgrims in *Cape Cod* is emblematic of his attitude toward the religiously-motivated English settlers in the rest of his work. In his nuanced response—praising their earnestness and condemning their desire for material wealth—Thoreau grapples with “Protestantism’s double legacy” that Stoll identifies, “green and Green—money and ecology, capitalist development and environmental protection” (*Protestantism* x). In his response to the Puritans, Thoreau addresses the fundamental issue at the root of their split legacy: what is the ultimate standard of value? This question, particularly as it applied to how humans valued the natural world, troubled America since the time of the first English settlers. As we have seen, many of them came to the New World for better economic opportunities than they had in the old world. So

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<sup>14</sup> While James McIntosh interprets these passages as evidence that Thoreau is rejecting Puritan beliefs, his reading is quite strained (223–29). Sherman Paul offers a more balanced view in his assessment of *Cape Cod* (386–88).

Thoreau was fascinated when religious settlers were able to overcome this predominant, market-oriented way of valuing the New World and instead articulate their relationship to the New England wilderness in terms of their efforts to glorify God and enjoy him forever. In spite of his doctrinal disagreements with the Puritans—Thoreau rejects their insistence on the Bible as the exclusive revelation of God (*A Week* 143–44; *WA* 108), their valuation of hard work (*Correspondence* 496; *WA* 111–12), and their robbery of Indian land (*Cape* 33)—Thoreau learned from them the possibilities of an economy and an ethic based on religion, and the dangers of one based on the human desires served in the marketplace. Faced with these competing ways of explaining how humans should value and interact with New England’s natural world, Thoreau chose the more pietistic approach.

This is why even when the Puritans disappointed or frustrated him, Thoreau knew that he had to understand them if he wanted to understand how he and his neighbors could succeed in fulfilling the high calling that their ancestors had failed to live out. In one journal entry, written a few days after visiting the American Antiquarian Library where he particularly noted Cotton Mather’s personal library (*HMJ* 7: 99; 1/4/55), Thoreau expresses Emerson’s belief that the early settlers had a more original relation to the universe and signals his intention to learn from them. Writing about John Josselyn, William Wood, Mather, and other writers from “those days,” Thoreau concludes, “Certainly that generation stood nearer to nature, nearer to the facts, than this, and hence their books have more life in them” (*HMJ* 7: 109; 1/9/55).<sup>15</sup> Immediately after this assessment, Thoreau writes in parenthesis what seems to be a lesson that he has learned

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<sup>15</sup> Richardson attributes this shift in Thoreau’s attitude to his work on the lecture, “What is Man?” (334).

from his reading of Wood: “(Sometimes a lost man will be so beside himself that he will not have sense enough to trace back his own tracks in the snow)” (*HMJ* 7: 109). While Thoreau doesn’t say where this adage came from, it is clearly his distillation of a story that Wood tells about a young woman who got lost while attempting to make a short journey and “wandered six or seven days in most bitter weather. . . . The snow being upon the ground at first, she might have tracked her own footsteps back again, but wanting that understanding, she wandered till God by his special providence brought her to the place she went from, where she lives to this day” (30). Thoreau applies Wood’s lesson on winter navigation to his own situation as a man trying to find his place in New England’s history and landscape.<sup>16</sup> He learns from Wood the importance of tracing back the path that his tradition has taken in order to understand where he is now and how he can go forward.<sup>17</sup>

In tracing his own region’s tracks back through its history, Thoreau came to agree with the Puritan’s pious belief that God’s glory and redemption were particularly revealed here in New England. He inherited from them the perception of this place as a promised land and the belief that watchfulness is needed because something of divine importance is occurring here and now. Like them, he composed and retold New England

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<sup>16</sup> Many Thoreau scholars, however, continue to view Thoreau as having a negative attitude toward history, overlooking his copious reading and note taking on historical works. Even Malcom Young, who describes ways that Thoreau learns from the Christian tradition, claims, “More often, however, he criticizes Christians for their orientation toward the past rather than for their insincerity or anxiety. As was common among some other transcendentalists, most notably his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau believed that seeking meaning in history rather than in the present was fundamentally misguided” (16). Sattelmeyer explains Thoreau’s conflicted attitude toward history as a tension between the Transcendentalist focus on the present, and its desire for a national mythology, thus leading to Thoreau’s interest in primary accounts of American history (42–43).

<sup>17</sup> Michael P. Branch also sees Thoreau’s comment here as registering his awareness of “the historical and literary value of studying earlier American naturalists” (“Before Nature Writing” 100; *Reading the Roots* xxv). Strangely enough, while Branch provides an excellent overview of Wood’s writing, he fails to note that Thoreau develops his image from a story Wood tells.

history and recorded scientific observations because he hoped these methods would perhaps elevate him “for an instant upon Pisgah” where he could sense “the world which was dead prose to me become living & divine” (*PJ* 4: 53–54).<sup>18</sup>

### *Re-Settling Walden for Spiritual Ends*

Thoreau begins his historical account of his move to Walden by telling his neighbors they are living for the wrong end. In the first pages of his text he distinguishes between the biblical “fool” who lays “up treasures where moth and rust will corrupt” and his own desire to discover a “godlike” or “immortal” mode of life that is in keeping with the “divinity in man” (*WA* 5, 7). He declares that this latter mode of life would fulfill “what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man” (*WA* 8). This is only the first of *Walden*’s three references to the initial question of the *Shorter Westminster Catechism*, and the implications of this question and its answer—“to glorify God, and enjoy him forever”—provide, as Sargent Bush Jr. claims, “the essential shape and direction of his entire narrative” (1).<sup>19</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, the attitude toward life that Thoreau expresses in *Walden* largely aligns with the lessons that a contemporary Presbyterian minister draws from this question and answer:

I learn (1.) That I must make it my daily aim to honor God and to secure his favor, and to seek my chief happiness in so doing. (2.) That my greatest happiness is not to be found in this world, but in the everlasting ages of the next. (3.) That I have no right to make the gaining of worldly goods my chief desire and labor. (4.) That most men mistake the true

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<sup>18</sup> Countless books and articles have been written on Thoreau’s watchfulness, but few of these put this predominant characteristic of his in the context of the New England Puritan tradition. Scott Slovic, for instance, explores Thoreau’s search for awareness via a more psychological lens (21–60). Stanley Cavell locates Thoreau’s search for alertness in his use of language, and he makes several helpful connections between Thoreau and his Puritan predecessors (8–10, 18, 74).

<sup>19</sup> Bush notes Thoreau’s two “explicit reference[s]” to this question in *Walden*, but Thoreau also parodies it elsewhere (1; *WA* 78).

business and proper use of this short life, since they take no proper pains to honor God or to secure his favor. (5.) It must be a sad and fearful event to die before one has begun to live for God and for eternity. (Boyd 20)

The only one of these orthodox tenets that *Walden* utterly rejects is number two, which Thoreau would find too dualistic. But Thoreau reinterprets the other four to imagine how they could be practiced in the context of Walden Pond's ecology; he seeks practical, physical means of living out these grand ends. Thoreau accomplishes his reinterpretation by comparing how he lived in the woods near Concord with how the first Puritan settlers lived there, as described by Edward Johnson.<sup>20</sup> In *Walden*, Thoreau figures himself as a Puritan settler whose aim is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. The original Puritan histories, while ostensibly following the catechism's second question and answer—"The Word of God . . . is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him" (Boyd 22)—subtly shift the emphasis from this word itself to how God's word is presently being fulfilled in the American wilderness. Thoreau continues this shift; like them he focuses not on the past, but on the present, on how God's millennial kingdom is unfolding in the New England wilds today. By aligning his life with this kingdom, Thoreau discovers that he can become an elect member in God's natural covenant with New Englanders and can participate with God's ongoing redemptive work in the processes of the New World wilderness.

In the middle of "Economy," where Thoreau determines to find what life consists of by providing only for his essential physical needs, he turns to Edward Johnson's account of the original settlers of Concord. "Old Johnson, in his 'Wonder-Working

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<sup>20</sup> Cavell also views *Walden* as reliving the original settlement of New England: "That moment of origin is the national event re-enacted in the events of *Walden*, in order this time to do it right, or to prove that it is impossible; to discover and settle this land, or the question of this land, once for all" (8).

Providence,”” describes how the first settlers did not build houses initially but lived in holes dug into the hillside so that they could devote themselves to finding food. That first year “‘the earth, by the Lord’s blessing, brought forth bread to feed them,’ and the first year’s crop was so light that ‘they were forced to cut their bread very thin for a long season’” (*WA* 39). Thoreau commends these settlers and prefers their approach to that of his contemporaries: “In this course which our ancestors took there was a show of prudence at least, as if their principle were to satisfy the more pressing wants first. But are the more pressing wants satisfied now? . . . [T]he country is not yet adapted to *human* culture, and we are still forced to cut our *spiritual* bread far thinner than our forefathers did their wheaten” (*WA* 39–40). Thoreau’s assessment of these settlers implies that his contemporaries spend so much time building fine houses and satisfying their material needs that they neglect their more pressing spiritual wants.

Johnson begins his historical account with a similar rhetorical move, setting the Puritan colonists’ desire for spiritual things against the material desires that motivate other colonists. In his introduction he explains that while most colonists leave their country to “possess a fatter . . . or warmer” one, the Puritans

forsooke a fruitfull Land, stately Buildings, goodly Gardens, Orchards, yea, deare Friends, and neere relations, to goe to a desart Wildernesse. . . . [H]ere the onely encouragements were the laborious breaking up of bushy ground, with the continued toyl of erecting houses . . . in this howling desart; all which they underwent, with much cheerfulness, that they might enjoy Christ and his Ordinances in their primitive purity. (A2)

And as his full title, *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Savior in New-England*, indicates, Johnson attributes the success of these Puritan settlers to the care of the same God that led the Israelites to the Promised Land. Like the Israelites and like these Puritan settlers, Thoreau does not go to Walden in search of a more luxurious life; rather, he



leaves the civilized life of the town in search of a pure and primitive source of spiritual food in the New England wilderness. Johnson's description of the Concord settlers sets the structure for Thoreau's economy, where he embraces the physical privations of wilderness living in order to whet his appetite for "spiritual *bread*" (*WA* 40). Johnson provides Thoreau with a precedent for seeing the New England wilderness, and in this case the immediate area around Walden Pond, as an environment that cultivates and fulfills spiritual hunger.

In contrasting the exemplary Puritan settlers of Concord with other colonists who look to "possess a fatter land," Johnson participates in what we have seen is a common trope of Puritan histories, warning his readers how easily spiritual appetite could turn into an appetite for material comfort. Johnson himself is ambivalent about the material blessings of God: while material hardship increases spiritual appetite, material abundance proves God's favor. No one could have imagined "that this Wilderness should turn a mart for Merchants in so short a space," he writes as sure evidence of God's blessing (208). Cronon has shown that the material blessings provided by the wilderness eventually came to be seen as signs of God's blessings (*Changes in the Land* 160–70), drowning out the more pietistic perception of physical trials as God's method of training his people.

Yet as we have seen, the Puritan histories also warn about the dangers of material prosperity; Bradford, Mather, and Thoreau all contrast non-religious settlers, whose desire for material wealth dulls their spiritual appetite, with more religiously motivated settlers. Bradford feared that wealth would "be the ruine of New-England" (294), and Mather condemned those whose "*main End was to catch Fish*" because these

“*Enchantments of the World make them forget their Errand into the Wilderness*”

(*Magnalia* 147, 144). This contrast between settlers who follow spiritual aims and those who are distracted by material ends runs through the Puritan histories that Thoreau read and cited in *Walden*, and it shapes his own narrative.<sup>21</sup>

Although Thoreau disagrees with Mather about what measures should be taken to ward off the “enchantments” of material prosperity—Mather suggested more liberal support of ministers who could warn the people and Thoreau urges his neighbors to get out into the New England wilds and witness God’s creation for themselves—they both agree on the main threat to the success of New England’s errand: pursuing financial prosperity instead of God’s glory. By beginning his own narrative with a reference to “the chief end of man” and by announcing his intention to avoid the “fool’s life” that lays “up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal,” Thoreau signals his determination to settle near Walden in search of spiritual food, in the tradition of the first Puritans who settled Concord. As Thoreau writes in an 1855 letter to Harrison Blake, “As a preacher, I should be prompted to tell men, not so much how to get their wheat bread cheaper, as of the bread of life compared with which *that* is bran. Let a man only taste these loaves, and he becomes a skillful economist at once” (*Correspondence* 384). This is the economics that Thoreau taught in the beginning of *Walden*, one that values the bread of life above all else.

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<sup>21</sup> For an extensive list of Thoreau’s documented reading, see Sattelmeyer. Thoreau certainly drew on Johnson in the composition of *Walden*. Sattelmeyer’s records do not prove that Thoreau read Mather’s *Magnalia* or Bradford’s *History* prior to publishing *Walden*, although he did read them later (138, 234). His knowledge of these writers was likely second hand and through anthologized extracts in the various state collections he read, although he may have read Mather’s *Magnalia* while at school or in the library of one of his Concord friends.

This hunger for food that truly satisfies drives Thoreau's critique of much of his culture's technology and morality, which he sees as the result of empirical science divorced from a consideration of man's higher end. If his neighbors are like those whose main end was to catch fish, to make money, then science and railroads and other "modern improvements" are appropriate. But Thoreau worries that these "are but improved means to an unimproved end" and challenges his neighbors to consider what their chief end should be (*WA* 52). Civilization has its advantages, as Thoreau observes when comparing his neighbor's house with the burrows of Concord's first settlers, but "[w]ith a little more wit we might use these materials so as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing" (*WA* 40). Thoreau isn't interested, then, in a form of science that merely finds better means of living without considering "the true end of life" (*WA* 57). In his economy, "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it" (*WA* 31), and as *Walden* makes clear, Thoreau's understanding of "life" includes attributes that the Puritans would divide into separate material and spiritual categories. The "true end of life," for Thoreau, cannot be reduced to a material or financial goal, and yet it must be attained through physical means. Thoreau circles around to this theme many times. In "Sounds," he goes on and on about how trains could be beneficial "[i]f all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!" (*WA* 116). Yet as Thoreau's repeated "if's" indicate, all is not as it seems and men are more often "run over" by the train than assisted "on their errands" (*WA* 92, 116).

Similarly, in "The Ponds" Thoreau expresses his outrage that the "pur[e]" and "sacred" Walden water may be polluted by being piped into town, so villagers could

“earn their Walden by the turning of a cock or drawing of a plug!” (*WA* 192). This technology treats Walden’s water as a mere commodity, ignoring all its higher values, and Thoreau responds with a screed against the railroad and the narrow view of value that such technology represents. These “Lakes of Light,” Thoreau insists, “are too pure to have a market value” (*WA* 199), and he pleads with his neighbors to recognize this higher, spiritual value and not let their avarice for material comforts lead them to adopt “improved means to an unimproved end.” Buell argues that Thoreau’s “language here teeters between the old-fashioned jeremiad’s familiar call to moral purification and a more pointedly environmental protectionist eviction of fallen humanity from nature” (*Environmental Imagination* 121), but Thoreau does not so much want to evict humans from nature as lead them to value it in a different way. In his condemnation of technological comforts, Thoreau draws not only on the Puritans’ rhetorical form, but also on their understanding that God could feed his people in the New England wilds as long as human greed did not cause them to succumb to the “*Enchantments of this World*” (Mather, *Magnalia* 144).

This purpose—to find spiritual food in the natural world—drives Thoreau to seek a means of living that would not lead to social respectability or material gain but rather to a “poetic or divine life” that is man’s higher end (*WA* 90). In a jibe at Franklin and his proto-pragmatist tradition of reading Mather’s *Bonifacius*, which was better known by its running title *Essays to Do Good*, Thoreau strongly rejects the “Doing-good” morality that is primarily concerned with what other people think and how to obtain happiness and prosperity.<sup>22</sup> So even when he borrows terms from the context of business and utilitarian

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<sup>22</sup> For the reception of *Bonifacius*, see David Levin’s introduction. Jeffrey Cramer also points out Thoreau’s ambiguous allusion here to Mather and/or Franklin (Cramer 70). Arguing along a similar line of

morality, he does so in order to reject the goals of business and the bourgeois morality that serves those ends: “My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish” (*WA* 19–20).<sup>23</sup> While Thoreau’s readers often think his end in going to Walden was simplicity itself (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 145), Thoreau clearly states that he went there not merely to live simply, but to cultivate something that civilized comforts might inhibit, an appetite for “spiritual *bread*.”

As Bush argues, much of “Economy” is devoted to finding the “means of life” that will enable a person to achieve their “chief end” (*WA* 8). And while Bush claims Thoreau found “the old answers were of little value” in finding this end (2), Thoreau pursues his method of simplicity with a keen appreciation for these old answers. For instance, Thoreau explains that instead of new clothes to wear, he wants to be “a new man,” echoing the Pauline and Puritan doctrine of regeneration. And the purpose by which he measures his need for new clothes is the purpose that led the Puritans to the New World: “if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do” (*WA* 23). Thoreau aims to worship God, and like the Puritans, he claims he can

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reasoning about Thoreau’s morality serving pious ends, Bush claims that Thoreau’s emphasis on “being good” rather than “Doing-good” follows Jonathan Edwards’ moral philosophy (3).

<sup>23</sup> Buell is partially correct when he observes that Thoreau “root[ed] his critique of American culture within that culture, invoking for example not only Puritan antecedence . . . and ‘Spartan simplicity,’ . . . but also the Franklinian virtue of rigorous prudence in conducting business” (*Environmental Imagination* 146). As Buell notes elsewhere in his study (*Environmental Imagination* 127–28), Thoreau’s withdrawal from civilization also partakes of the pastoral tradition (Marx 242–65). But Thoreau’s morality is not “Franklinian”: Thoreau certainly cites many authorities to justify his simple lifestyle, but even when he couches his experiment in business terms, his goals remain the goals of the Puritans, and not those of Franklin.

do this better in the simplicity of the New England wilderness, without civilization and its trappings.

Thoreau expounds on this goal in one of *Walden's* most definitive paragraphs, as he declares his determination to discover what the higher end of his life actually is:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my new excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” (*WA* 90–91)

Several commentators have agreed that Thoreau ends up agreeing with this orthodox answer even while he redefines the meaning of its terms.<sup>24</sup> What is particularly of interest here is that even the method that Thoreau employs to test this answer is one he adapts from the Puritan tradition. Bush rightly notes that Thoreau refuses to “*hastily*” accept the orthodox answer that his tradition has handed down to him (4); rather, Thoreau insists on finding out for himself if this is his chief end, and yet as Buell points out, even this determination to find the truth of religion for himself is a typical Puritan attitude

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<sup>24</sup> James McIntosh calls this text “a favorite of [Thoreau’s]—though he gave it a distinctly unorthodox reading. . . . One of Thoreau’s contributions in the romantic tradition is in effect to redefine God, man, glory, joy, and forever in this text, and thereby to celebrate the gift of life” (297). Bush concurs in a roundabout way, claiming that “while the discovery and celebration of the presence of God in one’s life would perhaps not seem to most readers a satisfactory way to describe the goal of Thoreau’s quest at Walden Pond, it is far from alien to it” (5). And Gatta argues similarly that “Thoreau’s book *does* end up affirming, in its own unorthodox but serious religious terms, that ‘it is the chief end of man to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever.’ Doubtless Thoreau would insist that *Walden* demonstrates more authentic *enjoyment* of God than does the Westminster catechism” (*Making Nature Sacred* 267 n. 39).

(*New England* 202). Thoreau has reason to expect this experiential method will teach him to truly glorify and enjoy God because it was the method his ancestors employed in this same place; by going to the New England wilderness and stripping off the corruptions of civilization, he hopes to see “God and Nature face to face.” Even when he cites the Bible or other inherited authorities, he does so in search of a new revelation. One of the most striking examples of this occurs when Thoreau cites a Biblical passage, Ezekiel 18, where a prophet overturns a divine revelation made previously, in Exodus 34.7 and elsewhere. Thoreau thus claims a biblical precedent for rejecting old revelations; an imaginative and very Protestant move (*WA* 32).<sup>25</sup> His bold reading and insistence on finding the end of life for himself ensure that he will not be “overcome with drowsiness” like millions of his contemporaries and like Jesus’ disciples in Gethsemane (Mat. 26:36–46). Instead, like the Puritans whose expectation of the millennial kingdom kept them earnest and watchful, he will be kept awake “by an infinite expectation of the dawn” (*WA* 90).

At times, then, Thoreau figures himself as a reforming, Puritan-style preacher, urging his neighbors to leave the comforts of town with its corrupt church and join him in the woods where God reveals himself more clearly. Richardson, similarly, sees Thoreau as embodying the protestant impulse to find purity by separating from the community and organized church: “Thoreau’s ultimate reformed community of one at Walden would be an example of the extreme results of the tendency of Protestants to splinter away from any parent body” (104). When Thoreau finds that his “fellow-citizens” were not going to provide him with “any curacy or living any where else,” he decides to go “to the woods”

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<sup>25</sup> As Bush notes later in his essay, “It is one of the many conscious ironies of Thoreau’s book that while presenting what he considered a new scripture, a new affirmation of faith, . . . he often appealed to their knowledge of the inherited orthodoxy” (6).

(*WA* 19). While Thoreau had a vitriolic antipathy for most actual ministers, this is not the only time he compares his business with theirs. Walter Harding quotes the letter Thoreau wrote to the Harvard President asking for permission, like local clergymen had, to borrow books from the college's library: "I am encouraged to ask this . . . *because I have chosen letters for my profession*, and so am one of the *clergy* embraced by the spirit at least of her rule" (*Days* 267). By going to the woods, though, Thoreau hopes to get away from the gloomy morality of the church: "Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints. Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring him forever" (*WA* 78). Clearly this form of religion has forgotten that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. By portraying the church he leaves as corrupt, Thoreau follows the Puritan settlers who portray themselves as leaving the corrupt church in England and coming to the American wilds in order to recreate the church of the New Testament in its "primitive purity" (Johnson A2). Thus Thoreau goes to Walden, a "distiller of celestial dews" (*WA* 179), "too pure to have a market value" (*WA* 199), and fit to be "called 'God's Drop'" (*WA* 194). Here, by this pure source, Thoreau can listen to the "vespers" of the whippoorwills (*WA* 123), receive the "confessions" of the poor and half-witted (*WA* 151), and hear the harmonious sound of his fishing companion humming a "psalm" (*WA* 174). Even Thoreau's famous proposal "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (*WA* 84) echoes the rooster who reminded Peter that he had betrayed Christ.<sup>26</sup> Part of Thoreau's business at Walden Pond, then, is to offer his neighbors an example of a more

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<sup>26</sup> In "Walking," Thoreau makes this biblical allusion explicit (*EX* 220–21). Cavell also compares Thoreau's identification with the chanticleer with his prophetic role, "The purity of Chanticleer's prophecy is that he can speak only to waken and to warn; his essential calling is to watch" (38).



pure, faithful form of religion, just as the Puritans' errand in the wilderness was to show the corrupt, Old World church a model of primitive, pure Christianity.

In addition to the prophetic stance he takes toward his neighbors, Thoreau also models his life at Walden after his Puritan predecessors by meeting his physical needs through farming and fishing. He makes much of these practices, but like the settlers that Johnson describes, Thoreau wants to harvest a crop rich in both material and spiritual sustenance. He explicitly tells his readers that he planted his beans "Before I finished my house," following the chronology of Concord's first settlers, who did not build houses until "the earth, by the Lord's blessing, brought forth bread to feed them" (*WA* 54, 39). And while his crop only netted \$8.71½, Thoreau found that his farming fed more than his pocketbook: "All things considered, that is, considering the importance of a man's soul and of to-day . . . I believe that that was doing better than any farmer in Concord did that year" (*WA* 55). As Leo Marx observes, while Thoreau's farming venture is an economic failure, "that judgment is irrelevant to Thoreau's purpose, as his dominant tone, the tone of success, plainly indicates" (258). He doesn't mind cutting his wheaten bread thin if by so doing he can obtain spiritual bread.

Thus from the beginning Thoreau announces that he is searching for spiritual food, the stuff that sustained the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. Early in "Economy" he describes his attentive waiting for any message that "was in the wind": "watching from the observatory of some cliff or tree, to telegraph any new arrival; or waiting at evening on the hill-tops for the sky to fall, that I might catch something, though I never caught much, and that, manna-wise, would dissolve again in the sun" (*WA* 17–18). And when he describes his more traditional farming in "The Bean-Field" chapter,

his agrarian work is clearly intended to cultivate spiritual fruit. He explains that he didn't primarily want the beans to eat, but he values his work "in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day." He signals his success in this crop when at the end of this paragraph he declares that he "harvested twelve bushels of beans," alluding to the "twelve baskets" of leftover food the disciples gathered after another parable-maker, Christ, fed the five thousand (*WA* 162; Matt. 14:20).<sup>27</sup> Thoreau's farming yields the imaginative tropes that will sustain him on his journey toward his place in God's covenant.

Near the conclusion of the chapter Thoreau makes the physical and spiritual harvest he hopes for more explicit and explains to his neighbors why their soil should be especially suitable for this crop. While his beans were a success, he plans in the future to plant "such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil . . . and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops." Yet Thoreau sadly admits that while he thought he planted these seeds the next summer, they have not yet come up, and he chides his neighbors for merely planting the "corn and beans each new year precisely as the Indians did centuries ago and taught the first settlers to do." Instead of "timid[ly]" following custom, Thoreau challenges his readers to "brave[ly]" try new crops in this new world soil: "why should not the New Englander try new adventures, and . . . raise other crops than these? Why concern ourselves so much about our beans for seed, and not be concerned at all about a new generation of men?" Thoreau's repetition of "new" in this

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<sup>27</sup> Thoreau also alludes to this miracle a few pages earlier when he describes how he did not feed visitors who came in large groups, but that their physical hunger "seemed miraculously retarded" so that he "could entertain thus a thousand as well as twenty" (*WA* 142).

passage emphasizes New England's status as a fit place to cultivate a new kind of human culture, echoing the Puritan vision of New England as the place of Christ's millennial kingdom. Too often the seeds that Thoreau values are "broadcast and floating in the air" and do not take "root and grow" in us (*WA* 164). His allusion to Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–23) both links Thoreau to the archtypal parable-maker and provides a text on which he can preach the theme he has sounded since the first pages of *Walden*. Thoreau's contemporaries, by caring too much for "large farms and large crops," are laying up treasure in the wrong place and have dulled their appetite for spiritual bread. Like Bradford, who condemned the early settlers for being too eager to plant more land and not dedicated enough to the purity of the church in New England, Thoreau urges his neighbors to grow crops more appropriate to this new soil so that they may become a new generation of men, worthy to live in God's new land.

Like the first settlers in Concord, Thoreau began farming before he built his house in order that he might have something to eat, and he went fishing out of a similar need: "I have actually fished from the same kind of necessity that the first fishers did" (*WA* 211). And like these Puritans, Thoreau's main end in coming to Walden was not to catch fish, but to catch men, like Jesus' disciples and like the Puritan errand to spread the gospel in the New World (Mather, *Magnalia* 151–52). As he writes when explaining why boys should be allowed to hunt and fish, "though sportsmen only at first, if possible, mighty hunters at last, so that they shall not find game large enough for them in this or any vegetable wilderness,—hunters as well as fishers of men" (*WA* 212). In this chapter, "Higher Laws," Thoreau's "main metaphor is an elaborate expansion of Christ's demand

that His Apostles be fishers of men, catching the spiritual rather than the physical” (Pickard 70).

The paradox that Thoreau wrestles with in this chapter is that the spiritual food men need often comes through material, sensual activities; thus he begins the chapter marveling at his own desire to eat a raw woodchuck, “not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented” (*WA* 210). Fishing becomes an apt metaphor for this paradoxical connection between the wild and the spiritual. Thoreau describes the dual nature of his catch in an earlier passage:

It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook. (*WA* 175)

Thoreau articulates here a counterintuitive fact; the downward cast brings a catch from above, the sensual life reveals “Higher Laws.” He thus urges his neighbors to also cultivate a lifestyle that will enable them to catch “two fishes as it were with one hook.”

As Thoreau narrates his reenactment of the Puritan settler experience—he moves from the comforts of the town to plant the New England wilderness hoping for a divine crop—he blends his religious quest with a national one in the same way that the Puritan historians blended these missions. While the nation the Puritans founded has gone awry, Thoreau works to reestablish the kind of nation for which they had hoped. From the beginning of his book, Thoreau frames his quest for material simplicity in national terms: “What is the nature of the luxury which enervates and destroys nations?” (*WA* 15). His question recalls Bradford’s fear that greed would be “the ruine of New-England,” and Thoreau states explicitly that he will answer this question by sifting through New

England's past to find out what went wrong and then begin again on a primitive, pure foundation. He urges his fellow "inhabitants of New England" to "spend one day as deliberately as Nature" in order to "work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition" for a "*point d'appui* . . . where you might find a wall or a state" (*WA* 96–98). And while he claims it was an "accident" that he moved to Walden "on Independence Day," the fourth of July was certainly an auspicious day to found his state (*WA* 84). Thoreau, then, does not remove himself to Walden Pond because he is opposed to society but because he wants to lay the foundation for a new society; he welcomes to his cabin "all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom's sake, and really left the village behind, I was ready to greet [them] with,—'Welcome, Englishmen! Welcome, Englishmen!'" (*WA* 154). Thoreau's greeting connects him to Samoset, the friendly Indian who welcomed the Pilgrims with these words and introduced them to Squanto, who taught them how to survive in the New World (Cramer 149). With this reference, Thoreau again links his settlement at Walden to the original, religiously-motivated settlement of New England. Like Samoset, Thoreau hopes to help found a new country.

Thoreau fleshes out the character of the state he is founding most fully in his conversation with John Field. Field is a recent immigrant from Ireland, and while at other times Thoreau expresses sympathy for the way the Irish are oppressed (*WA* 54, 92), here Thoreau is critical of the way Field and his family live; they remain poor and dirty because they aren't content with Thoreau's simple fare but strive for "tea, and coffee, and butter, and milk, and beef" and so must work hard to pay for these commodities. They clearly don't follow Thoreau's ideas about the higher end for which humans should

strive; as Thoreau puts it, they think “to live by some derivative old country mode in this primitive new country” (*WA* 208). So although they think they are in America, Thoreau defines his renewed America in opposition to theirs:

the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these [tea, coffee, and meat], and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the use of such things. . . . I should be glad if all the meadows on the earth were left in a wild state, if that were the consequence of men’s beginning to redeem themselves. A man will not need to study history to find out what is best for his own culture. (*WA* 205)

Thoreau claims here that history will not help achieve his “true America,” and yet his vision of America as a country whose people are free to lead a life devoted to higher ends, unhindered by civilization’s comforts, corruptions, and costs, comes from his own nation’s history. The mode of life that is pursued in Thoreau’s true America is a mode that enables men to begin to redeem themselves; by no longer seeing Nature as a resource to exploit for wealth, they can recognize that joining in its “wild luxuriant beauty” enables humans to approach heaven (*WA* 200).

Thoreau’s conversation with John Field about this “true America” occurs in the middle of his growing awareness that God is watching over him particularly. This belief frames his assertion that the true America provides humans with the freedom to pursue a redemptive mode of life, and it was the similar Puritan belief that God particularly oversaw and guided their settlement in New England that led them to view themselves as ushering in his millennial, redeemed kingdom. Thoreau opens this scene by describing a time when he “stood in the very abutment of a rainbow’s arch.” The rainbow symbolizes the covenant God made with Noah between himself and “every living creature” (Gen. 9:12–13). Immediately after his account of this “lake of rainbow light,” Thoreau ponders

his status in another, more particular divine covenant: “As I walked on the railroad causeway, I used to wonder at the halo of light around my shadow, and would fain fancy myself one of the elect” (*WA* 202). Thoreau speculates about whether this phenomenon is widespread or particular to only a few, and he concludes that what matters is one’s perception of this luminescence: “are they not indeed distinguished who are conscious that they are regarded at all?” (*WA* 202–03). Thoreau’s question implies that all who are aware of nature’s attention and “notic[e]” can be elect members of a natural covenant between God and true Americans. With this move, he establishes a covenant even newer than the Puritans’. This covenant, fit for “this primitive new country” (*WA* 208), welcomes as elect members all who are awake to nature’s beauty and attention. This is why Thoreau expresses his determination not to be “overcome with drowsiness” but to “keep . . . awake” (*WA* 90): humans cannot achieve their chief end unless they keep a sharp lookout for nature’s beauty that, “manna-wise,” dissolves if our sight is dulled by looking for tea, coffee, and meat. It is no wonder, then, that while Thoreau catches “a fair string” of fish, John Field “disturbed only a couple of fins” (*WA* 208).

The penultimate chapter, “Spring,” is the culmination of the redemptive narrative Thoreau records in the spiritual history of his settlement at Walden Pond. Here his sense that God’s millennial kingdom is advancing in the wilds of New England nature is confirmed, and this revelation establishes the precedent for his conclusion, where he declares his intention to participate in the building of this kingdom. Many critics agree that in “Spring,” and particularly the sand bank passage, Thoreau expresses his belief that his experiment at Walden has been a success.<sup>28</sup> For it is while witnessing the patterns

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<sup>28</sup> Leo Marx states that “in the end, he seems to have satisfied himself about the efficacy of this method of redemption” (243). In his description of the coming of spring, Buell argues that “Thoreau draws

made in the thawing sand that Thoreau claims to see the unifying law of the universe: “it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf” (*WA* 308). What makes this revelation even more impressive is that, like his earlier observation of the halo around his shadow, it takes place on the edge of the railroad, the site of the technology that previously seemed irredeemably materialistic.<sup>29</sup> Watching these elemental patterns, Thoreau gains a new understanding of the Creator’s ability to accomplish his ends: “When I see . . . this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me,—had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about” (*WA* 306). The God who made the world is still working, here and now, and thus Thoreau concludes, the “earth . . . [a]nd not only it, but the institutions upon it, are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter” (*WA* 309). This allusion to Jeremiah not only reinforces his earlier claim that God is intimately in control of the world, but also serves as another reference to the covenantal relationship Americans, and the rest of the earth, enjoy with God. God tells Jeremiah, “Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel” (Jer. 18:6). By paying attention to the work of God that

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on an old-time Calvinist rhetoric of grace when it comes to imaging the ‘memorable crisis’ of the season ‘which all things proclaim.’ Suddenly an ‘influx’ of ‘light’ though ‘evening’ was ‘at hand’—and, lo! Spring as Irresistible Grace” (*Environmental Imagination* 230). McIntosh claims simply, “Thoreau’s renewal . . . [is] the chief end of his effort to relate to nature” (241). And Bush asks about Thoreau’s conclusion, “For what is Thoreau doing but in some degree glorifying God and, through his exuberant reaction to his fresh awakening, showing us an example of full enjoyment of this new communion?” (8). Gordon Boudreau sees Thoreau’s accomplishment in particularly biblical terms: “Thoreau saw himself. . . as a procreator in an act that has to do chiefly with seeing with new vision. Especially in the chapter “Spring,” *Walden* lays claim to being considered not only a book of Revelation . . . but a book of Genesis as well” (3).

<sup>29</sup> Leo Marx provides the classic reading of the significance of this vision occurring on the railroad bank, the site of Thoreau’s earlier railings against this form of technology (242–65).



is occurring all around him, Thoreau enters into the covenantal relationship his Puritan forefathers claimed as the privilege of New Englanders and that he sees as available to all who pay attention to God's ongoing work.

The rest of "Spring" is a joyous exultation of the present divine work. As Thoreau exclaims, "What at such a time are histories, chronologies, traditions, and all written revelations?" (*WA* 310). This is no time to mind the past; rather, the focus of his history is the present. For "Walden was dead and is alive again," right now is the "pleasant spring morning [when] all men's sins are forgiven" and when "the vilest sinner may return" (*WA* 311, 314). Even the "youngest plant . . . has entered into the joy of his Lord." Our response should be to embrace joyfully this millennial kingdom, but some hang back: "Why the jailer does not leave open his prison doors,—why the judge does not dismiss his case,—why the preacher does not dismiss his congregation! It is because they do not obey the hint which God gives them, nor accept the pardon which he freely offers to all" (*WA* 315). This is why Thoreau declares that we "need the tonic of wildness," because when we perceive the spring glory of God's creation, we will remember the higher life for which we were made and freely rejoice in God's redemptive work. As Thoreau recounts his own experience one spring morning, "the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead, if they had been slumbering in their graves, as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality. All things must live in such a light. O Death, where was thy sting? O Grave, where was thy victory, then?" (*WA* 317). Thoreau's prose in this chapter is a network of biblical quotations as he searches for language to express the redemptive ecological order in which he finds himself.

His conclusion extends the implications of this new covenant; he declares that not only is God redemptively working right now, but also that he invites us to work with him. While Thoreau's contemporaries are distracted by "[s]uperfluous wealth" and dinner parties, he delights "to walk even with the Builder of the universe" (*WA* 329). Thoreau urges his readers not to be distracted by what Mather termed those "*Enchantments of the World*" (*Magnalia* 144), but to seize this remarkable opportunity that God offers them: "Drive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction,—a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse. So will help you God, and so only. Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the work" (*WA* 315). This declaration—that God may allow our lives to participate in his ongoing creation of the universe—is predicated on Thoreau's earlier claims that God is still building the universe and permits us to walk in a covenant relationship with him, singled out by a rainbow's arch and a halo of light. This belief in God's present, ongoing work in creation underlies Thoreau's commitment to keep awake in infinite expectation of the dawn and his determination to live life in such a way that he may share in this divine work. Like his Puritan predecessors, Thoreau believed that God's history is being made in the present, and that we have the opportunity to make it with him.

#### *Natural Philosophy for the Glory of God*

Much has been made of a supposedly drastic shift in Thoreau's journal in the early 1850s, after which he records fewer philosophical reflections and more empirical observations. This shift has caused critical disagreement, because even while Thoreau's journals are increasingly filled with empirical observations, his "anti-scientific bias," as

Nina Baym calls it, grows more pronounced (221).<sup>30</sup> One of Thoreau's most quoted statements on this subject is his criticism of the narrow scientific categories recognized by the Association for the Advancement of Science. Thoreau's work fit none of their terms, as he explains in his journal, "I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing stock of the scientific community-to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me-in as much as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. . . . The fact is I am a mystic-a transcendentalist-& a natural philosopher to boot" (*PJ* 5: 469; 3/5/53). Even with comments like this, where Thoreau subordinates his empirical efforts to his transcendental ends, good critics still misconstrue his understanding of science. Buell, for instance, lists five general "environmental projects," including religion and natural history, that motivated Thoreau's work throughout his life, and he claims that each one helped Thoreau to observe the natural environment more accurately and sensitively (*Environmental Imagination* 126–32). While this is true, the goal of all of Thoreau's projects was not simply to observe nature more accurately. That was not his main end. Rather, his various "environmental projects" were motivated by his religious desires and his belief

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<sup>30</sup> Harding offers a similar assessment of the trajectory of Thoreau's journal, but where Baym concludes that the turn to empiricism stems from the "failure" of Thoreau's Transcendentalist science (which she does not adequately differentiate from Emerson's view of science) (228, 232–34), Harding finds Thoreau's empirical observations to be further evidence of his keen abilities to observe accurately and to note relationships between different objects ("Walden's" 47–48, 59). Michel Granger views Thoreau's journal, particularly during 1852, as the medium in which he worked out this tension: "De multiples dénégations concernant son appartenance à la science, ainsi que des remarques sur la complexité de son attitude à l'égard du transcendentalisme et de l'histoire naturelle, soulignent la position hybride de Thoreau, prise entre la science <<triste>> et les <<balivernes>> [moonshine] transcendentalists" (83). Buell records this tension in Thoreau's development when he notes that "accompanying his growing commitment to exact observation and to keeping tabs on contemporary scientific thought was a lingering testiness at the myopia of its pedantry and formalism" (*Environmental Imagination* 117). Ronald Hoag offers a good survey of the more finished essays that came out of these observations and argues that "his shift in emphasis to the physical side of the correspondence between facts and spirit does not of itself compromise his Transcendental standing" (153).

that he could best understand and practice God's higher laws through understanding his physical creation.

Buell is more attuned than many critics to what he terms Thoreau's "religiocentric" perspective (*Environmental Imagination* 128), but he still fails to see this as the prime motive that drives Thoreau's close observation of the natural world.

Thoreau, however, articulates his own work in this way and differentiates his methods from the reductive, empirical science of his day that sought to understand nature only to exploit it for economic gain. Instead, like the Puritans, Thoreau saw American creation as the arena in which God was working to bring salvation and to reveal his glory, and so he sought a more accurate perception of the natural world—through his modes of history and natural philosophy—in order to better understand its higher laws and, by knowing and following them, to glorify God. Thus even when his later journals devote more volume to seemingly scientific descriptions, Thoreau continues to distance himself from utilitarian science and to subordinate empirical methods to a form of natural philosophy that explores a "newer world" than science could discover (*CC* 10).

The brief discussion that follows cannot fully explore Thoreau's unique science of higher laws; its aim, rather, is to examine one aspect of Thoreau's natural philosophy that has been overlooked: the way he draws on his Puritan predecessors to interpret natural phenomena for the glory of God. Most studies of Thoreau's science situate him among competing nineteenth-century views of science—in the best example of this approach, Laura Dassow Walls positions Thoreau as a "Humboldtian" scientist (94–166)—but by turning to an earlier generation of naturalists, whom Thoreau explicitly praises in his journals, we can begin to understand how this tradition offered Thoreau a model of

careful observation in the service of higher ends.<sup>31</sup> Understanding how Mather and Edwards understood natural philosophy enables one to see Thoreau's references to "the great snow"—one of which includes an explicit reference to Mather—as his continuation of their methods. In his later natural history essays, he develops their beliefs further, arguing not only that all creation glorifies God, but also that in order to glorify and enjoy God themselves, humans must assist other beings to glorify God by achieving their chief ends. He thinks his neighbors can begin to do this by enjoying all of God's creatures. The key to Thoreau's development of this idea is his use of the word "enjoy"—meaning both to delight in and to have the use of. Thoreau's injunction to enjoy God's creation, then, is an injunction to first of all delight in creation and to make the use of other creatures derivative of this delight in their well being. Thoreau thus makes bold ethical demands on his neighbors and provides a more specific shape to the kind of action required of Americans watching for the coming of God's kingdom.

As we have seen, Cotton Mather, in *The Christian Philosopher*, founds his project of natural philosophy on the same catechismal question that Thoreau pondered in *Walden*. In his initial paragraph he asserts that "philosophy" and religion are not enemies because natural philosophy brings "GLORY TO GOD." Following this logic, he declares: "In the *Dispositions* and *Resolutions* of PIETY thus enkindled, a *Man* most

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<sup>31</sup> Other critics position Thoreau within different nineteenth-century debates: Kichung Kim looks at the differences between Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray to argue that Thoreau, like Goethe, was too interested in the psychological benefits of natural observation to live up to his scientific potential (126, 130–32); Michael Berger views Thoreau's *The Dispersion of Seeds* as evidence that Thoreau agreed with Darwinian evolution and anticipated the problems Darwin raised regarding how plant species could spread (382–85); and William Rossi, citing contemporary thinkers like Michael Polanyi, makes a perhaps overly optimistic claim: "In opposing the positivist ideal of a detached, fully explicit and 'objective' knowledge predicated on an investigating consciousness conceived as independent from the phenomena it studies, Thoreau's critique at the beginning of positivism's domination of natural scientific method invites comparison with a more recent philosophy of science which, over the past fifteen years, has successfully overcome that domination" (14).

effectually *shews himself a MAN*, and with unutterable Satisfaction answers the grand END of his Being, which is, *To glorify GOD.*” Because “the whole *World* is indeed a *Temple of GOD*,” by studying it we can better know its “Almighty *Architect*” (*Christian Philosopher* 7).<sup>32</sup> With this justification, Mather launches into his extensive study of this world. Throughout the book, Mather rhapsodizes in wonder at God’s goodness and wisdom that he sees displayed in the natural world, and his last section, “Of Man,” emphasizes that this attitude toward the rest of creation is the highest way of fulfilling God’s command to Adam and Eve in Genesis: “No *Dominion over the Creatures* can be more acceptably, more delightfully exercised with me than this; for me to *employ them* as often as I please in *leading me to GOD*, and so in serving that which I propose as the chief END for which I *live, and move, and have my Being*; which is, *to glorify GOD, and acknowledge Him*” (*Christian Philosopher* 307). For Mather, careful observation of the natural world was not an end in itself or a means to better control it and extract human comforts; rather, a more accurate perception of creation enabled humans to better glorify and enjoy God.<sup>33</sup>

I need to offer a brief caveat here; alongside this tradition in which natural philosophy serves piety, Mather also draws on the other side of his Puritan legacy in his

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<sup>32</sup> Other critics have noted that Mather’s religious and scientific interests in some ways anticipate Transcendentalism. While Mather’s religious writings are more well-known today, he was a prominent scientist in early America; his letters to the British Royal Society providing accounts of storms, unusual animals, and other natural phenomena in America made him “one of the very few Americans elected by the Royal Society prior to 1750” (Murdock xxi). And in works like *Biblia Americana*, his magnum opus, and *The Christian Philosopher*, Mather’s careful attention to natural beauty “anticipated by a century the transcendentalists’ love of nature for its own sake” (Riley, *American Philosophy* 199).

<sup>33</sup> Admittedly, we have no evidence that Thoreau read *The Christian Philosopher*, but the Harvard library had copies of the book, and it had been republished in America in 1815 (Mather, *Christian Philosopher* xciii, xciv–xcvi, civ). Thoreau does cite Mather’s *Magnalia* in *Cape Cod* (CC 178), and he checked it out of Harvard’s library near the end of his life, in 1859, indicating that Mather remained on his mind (Sattelmeyer 234).

views on science. In this more familiar narrative, hard work and God's provision enable Christians to conquer the "*Devil's Territories*" and make them bloom with more profitable crops. Science assists them in this task by providing them with more precise control over the physical world. Both of these perspectives informed Mather. As Perry Miller argues, Mather's acceptance of Newtonian science was motivated both by his pietistic concerns and by more practical ones: "While [science] made apparent the true pattern of God's universe, it would also devise instruments—thrice blessed—for improving agriculture, manufacture, and navigation, which would improve the lot (and increase the wealth) of those who labored faithfully in their callings" (*New England Mind* 441). This latter view of science became oriented not toward glorifying God but toward providing humans with greater comfort, thus contributing to the industrial revolution. This is the source of the more reductive, utilitarian empiricism that developed in conjunction with the deism that gained prominence in the early nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

Jonathan Edwards, however, further developed the pietistic tradition of natural philosophy, focusing even more than Mather on how the natural world can lead to a deep wonder and appreciation for God's beauty.<sup>35</sup> While numerous critics have noted similarities between the writings of Edwards and Thoreau, they have admitted that

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<sup>34</sup> Woodbridge Riley explains the relation between these competing traditions: "American deism began in a reaction against Puritan determinism. The belief in a deity separate from the world, an idle spectator, an absentee landlord, was a logical rebound from the belief in a deity constantly interfering with the world, a magical intervener, a local busybody" (*American Thought* 55). For one account of how the struggle between these two views developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Miller's essay "The Insecurity of Nature" (*Nature's Nation* 121–33).

<sup>35</sup> Lane offers a good analysis of Jonathan Edwards theology of beauty and how that forms his understanding of the natural world (170–200). See also Conrad Cherry's analysis of the American history of interpreting nature typologically.

Thoreau almost certainly did not read Edwards.<sup>36</sup> In the wake of Phillis Cole's excellent study of Mary Moody Emerson, however, we finally have a better understanding of how Edwards' ideas could have reached Thoreau.<sup>37</sup>

Mary, Ralph Waldo's aunt, was a fascinating character and a vigorous intellect. While remaining a strict Calvinist, she read widely in theology and philosophy and passed her interpretations onto her nephews. She read many of Edwards' books, including *Freedom of the Will* (M. M. Emerson 86, 505; Cole 132), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (M. M. Emerson 302), *Dissertation Concerning True Virtue* (483), and apparently *Dissertation on the End for which God Created the World* (324). In her correspondence and conversation, Mary communicated her understanding of Edwards' view that the natural world is an image of God's glory;<sup>38</sup> in the midst of her reading of Kant and Coleridge and other continental thinkers, Edwards provided her with an American, Calvinist rationale for appreciating the beauty of the world. In one 1832 letter to Charles Chauncy Emerson, addressed to the care of his brother Waldo, Mary concludes a paragraph full of theological and philosophical questions by falling back on Edwards:

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<sup>36</sup> While Buell seems skeptical about the general value of a belief in a "correspondence between the natural and the spiritual," he concludes that "Without question, Thoreau's environmental perception remained energized throughout his life by a sense of natural piety, however secular his field notes became. In this sense, his mental makeup recalls the convergence of scientific curiosity and typological commitment in the thought of Jonathan Edwards" (*Environmental Imagination* 128, 129). See also Perry Miller who admits there is little evidence linking Edwards to Emerson but nonetheless sees similarities between the two (*Errand* 184–85), and John Gatta who links Edwards with Aldo Leopold while including "all of Miller's disclaimers about indirect intellectual lineage" (*Making Nature Sacred* 56).

<sup>37</sup> David Williams considers Mary's influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson, and he mentions in passing her influence on Thoreau (171).

<sup>38</sup> Wolf's observation that "Thoreau deliberately again and again uses 'image of God' to mean, in addition to its human reference, other created beings" directly parallels Edwards' use of this concept (159).



But this is deceptive—we never could feel this grandeur were we not related to Him beyond the present. Could we arrive at the ultimate (or *chief* as Edwards would say) end of our being without so many subordinate ones! Not ask with the traders what is the use—the *utilities*—but know by experimental philosophy that to admire the beautiful & love the good is enough. (324)

Mary's language here anticipates the argument Thoreau will make later in *Walden* and which he develops in his later work on natural philosophy: humans can fulfill their chief end by admiring the beautiful and loving the good in God's creation. In the early 1840s, Mary's interest in Edwards increased—Cole claims “Edwards was the presiding figure” in her Almanack (much of which Waldo and others read) between 1840-41—and she seemed particularly interested in his views of creation: ““When Edwards says ‘the end of creation was God's glory—to manifest himself—some may think this strange and misrepresenting the divine benevolence. Not a jot’” (qtd. in Cole 256). In her reading of Edwards, Mary appreciated the way his pious passion saw God's glory revealed throughout all of creation.

Mary wrote about her reading of Edwards in her correspondence with Waldo and Lidian; these comments impressed Waldo enough that he cited Edwards as an influence on his aunt in the lecture he gave on Mary as a representative New England woman (*Lectures* 402). Mary exercised a formative influence on Waldo's thinking, and Thoreau also had several conversations with her, spending time with her in 1836 and again in 1841, when she spent two weeks in Concord while Thoreau was living with the Emersons (Cole 259; Harding, *Days* 126–31). Thoreau spent at least two evenings with her during the winter of 1851-52 and remarked in his journal that she was the “wittiest & most

vivacious woman that I know . . . . In short she is a genius” (*PJ* 4: 183–84; 11/13/51).<sup>39</sup> Thoreau apparently read to her from his journal and his current draft of *Walden* (M. M. Emerson 538; Cole 283–84), and she saw to it that he was not veering too far from orthodoxy: “Reading from my MSS to Miss Emerson this evening & using the word God in one instance in perchance a merely heathenish sense—she inquired hastily in a tone of dignified anxiety—’Is that god spelt with a little g?’ Fortunately it was” (*PJ* 4: 242; 1/8/52). Later that spring Mary sent him a letter urging him to visit her again and bring the lecture he had recently given in a nearby town on his experiment at Walden, telling him, “Age loves the old fashion of catechizing the young” (551). When she was in town again in 1856 she wrote to him asking him to come and bring his “writings—hoping they will give me a clearer clue to your faith—its nature its destination & *Object!*” She tells him to be sure his work is directed toward the proper “motive & end” because all talent should be “perfected and bring its’ *additions* to the Owner” (578–79). Mary’s “catechizing” of Thoreau may well have shaped his revisions in *Walden*, and her encouragement to direct his work toward the highest object aligns with Edwards’ call to “admire the beautifull & love the good,” because they point to God.

Whether Thoreau imbibed these ideas from his own reading or from conversations with Mary Moody Emerson, his empirical observations remained directed toward this chief end. In his journal entries about Mather and other early American natural history writers—including more secular ones like William Wood—Thoreau records his keen admiration for the wonder with which they saw the world. He sensed

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<sup>39</sup> Later Thoreau writes about Mary to his friend Blake, telling him she is “the youngest person in Concord, though about eighty,—and the most apprehensive of a genuine thought; earnest to know of your inner life; most stimulating society; and exceedingly witty withal” (*Correspondence* 401–02).

that their approach offered a needed alternative to the more narrow-minded science of his day. What is particularly revealing is that while Thoreau praises all the early American naturalists, his own writings follow a particularly Puritan framework. This is significant, because Thoreau could have drawn on other strands of the New England tradition.

William Wood, in his *New England's Prospect*, barely mentions God, and his intent is to describe the “desirable, useful, and beneficial” natural resources of the new world to encourage future settlers (48). He even includes several mnemonic poems that list the various species of trees, animals, birds, and fish and explain their traits and practical uses (39, 41–42, 48–49, 54). Wood’s book clearly falls into the genre of exploration literature that William Cronon claims saw the landscape “in terms of commodities” and “treated members of an ecosystem as isolated and extractable units” (*Changes in the Land* 21). Yet while Thoreau praises Wood along with Mather, his own natural philosophy follows the religious approach of writers like Mather and Edwards, and not the more secular perspective of writers like Wood.

Thoreau most often praises these early naturalists for their attitude of wonder and amazement at the New England world. Instead of trying to classify coldly the creatures they saw, they recorded their awestruck response to the natural wonders of the new world: “The old naturalists were so sensitive and sympathetic to nature that they could be surprised by the ordinary events of life. It was an incessant miracle to them, and therefore gorgons and flying dragons were not incredible to them. The greatest and saddest defect is not credulity, but our habitual forgetfulness that our science is ignorance” (*HMJ* 13: 180; 3/5/60). Thoreau was willing to forgive these naturalists their empirical inaccuracies because at least they didn’t try to artificially abstract themselves

from nature—they remained sympathetic to it—and they saw the world they were in as miraculous. This attitude is more conducive to learning the higher laws that nature can teach than the reductive science that fueled the industrial growth of the later nineteenth century.

In January of 1855, Thoreau visited the Antiquarian Library in Worcester. He was impressed by its immense holdings and noted particularly the volumes that had once belonged to Cotton Mather: “One alcove contains Cotton Mather’s library, chiefly theological works, reading which exclusively you might live in his days and believe in witchcraft” (*HMJ* 7: 99). Thoreau doesn’t mention anything else about Mather in this entry, but four days later he returns to him and compares him to other, even earlier New England natural philosophers:

What a strong and hearty but reckless, hit-or-miss style had some of the early writers of New England, like Josselyn and William Wood and others elsewhere in those days; as if they spoke with a relish, smacking their lips like a coach-whip, caring more to speak heartily than scientifically true. They are not to be caught napping by the wonders of Nature in a new country, and perhaps are often more ready to appreciate them than she is to exhibit them. They give you one piece of nature, at any rate, and that is themselves. (Cotton Mather, too, has a rich phrase.) They use a strong, coarse, homely speech which cannot always be found in the dictionary, nor sometimes be heard in polite society, but which brings you very near to the thing itself described. . . . I have just been reading some in Wood’s “New England’s Prospect.” . . . Certainly that generation stood nearer to nature, nearer to the facts, than this, and hence their books have more life in them.

(Sometimes a lost man will be so beside himself that he will not have sense enough to trace back his own tracks in the snow.)

. . . What a gormandizing faith (or belief) [Wood] has, ready to swallow all kinds of portents and prodigies! (*HMJ* 7: 108–110; 1/9/55)

Thoreau praises these authors for their wild faith and language, which are so genuine that even their words seem to be a part of the natural world. Thoreau doesn’t seem to differentiate between the religiously-oriented natural philosophy of Mather and the more

secular approach of Wood and Josselyn, but he appears to value them for different reasons. Writers like Wood were important to Thoreau because they enabled him to learn what New England had been like when the English settlers first arrived. Later in January of 1855 he compares his own observations with Wood's to better understand how New England had changed during the intervening two centuries (*HMJ* 7: 132–37, 141; 1/24/55).

But the religious style of Mather also finds expression in Thoreau. Only three days after this entry where he mentions Mather, Thoreau records the surprising signs of summer he experienced on his winter walk that day. When he feels the warm sun on his back and hears the crow caw, he realizes “I am part of one great creature with him; if he has a voice, I have ears.” This perception of a wild vitality in which he participates leads him into a Psalm of praise modeled on Psalm 103: “Ah, bless the Lord, O my soul! bless him for wildness, for crows that will not alight within gunshot! and bless him for hens, too, that croak and cackle in the yard!” (*HMJ* 7: 112–13; 1/12/55). It is Mather's “rich phrase” that unexpectedly breaks into biblical praise, not Wood's or Josselyn's. So while Thoreau appreciates and values the broad New England tradition of natural history, his own style borrows its attitude most directly from the Puritan natural philosophers. When Thoreau breaks into poetry it is not—as in Wood—so his readers can more easily memorize the practical uses of various plants and animals; rather, it is because—like Mather and Edwards—his perception of the natural world leads to outbreaks of lyrical praise for the Creator.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Because of these kinds of statements, I differ from Walls' conclusion regarding whether Thoreau thought science should ultimately serve moral, religious ends; Walls sees Thoreau's attention to “the dreary and the terrible with the beautiful and joyous” as evidence that he learns to look with the inclusive, objective eye of science and stops asking “the moral ‘why?’” (242). As I argue, however,

The next winter, Thoreau copies down a lengthy letter that had been reprinted in one of the state histories he was reading in which Mather describes the great snow of 1717. Thoreau concludes Mather's long list of incidents that occurred in this storm with a significant, if enigmatic, comment: "These 'odd accidents,' [Mather] says, 'would afford a story. But there not being any relation to Philosophy in them, I forbear them.' He little thought that his simple testimony to such facts as the above would be worth all the philosophy he might dream of" (*HMJ* 8: 165; 2/3/56). Thoreau's gentle rebuke of Mather's oft-noted pedantry should not lead us to conclude that he himself seeks for facts stripped of philosophy. Rather, Thoreau's comment expresses his faith that natural facts themselves, if perceived fully, will reveal higher laws without any need for extra philosophy. As he writes in an early essay, "Let us not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth" (*Excursions* 27). It is from this position that he criticizes Mather for having too little faith, for trying to add his own philosophy instead of allowing God's natural creation to speak for itself.<sup>41</sup>

And yet in Thoreau's own writings, he follows the approach of Mather and Edwards in not merely setting down natural facts, but also in seeking to see and describe the spiritual truths into which they flower. One particularly relevant example of this is Thoreau's description of a "great snow" two years earlier. His journal entry, which I have truncated here, mines this fact—in which Mather found no relation to philosophy—for an incredibly rich spiritual crop:

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Thoreau's writing continues to evince his faith that every empirical fact, regardless of its apparent beauty or ugliness, testifies to spiritual truth.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Fink makes a similar point when he compares *A Week* to Thoreau's later natural history writing, particularly "Wild Apples" to argue that Thoreau did less "moral philosophizing . . . and began to rely more heavily on his careful descriptions of natural facts alone to carry the burden of the ideal" (213).

It is only the savage that can see the track of no higher life than an otter. Why do the vast snow plains give us pleasure-the twilight of the bent & half buried woods-! Is not all there consonant with virtue-Justice purity-courage magnanimity-are we not cheered by the sight.- & does not all this amount to the track of a higher life than the otters-A life which has not gone by and left a foot print merely but all that we see is the impress of its spirit. . . Where there is a perfect government of the world according to the highest laws-Is there no trace of intelligence there? Whether in the snow-or the earth or in ourselves? . . . Did this great snow come to reveal the track merely of some timorous hare-or of the Great Hare-whose track no hunter has seen? Is there no trace nor suggestion of Purity to be detected? If one could detect the meaning of the snow-would he not be on the trail of some higher life that has been abroad in the night? . . .

Is the great snow of use to the hunter only-and not to the saint-or him who is earnestly building up a life? . . . I would fain be a fisherman-hunter-farmer-preacher &c-but fish-hunt-farm-preach other things than usual. (*PJ* 7: 219–20; 1/1/54)

Thoreau is not content with being a “savage” who looks only for empirical facts. He hunts the “Great Hare” and is intent to “detect the meaning of the snow”; he may claim that facts flower in truth, but his practice is to philosophize about facts in order to “hunt” and “preach” higher laws.<sup>42</sup>

### *Enjoying Creation in the Economy of God's Glory*

Thoreau learned from New England's Puritan settlers that his business should be to live according to God's standards and not the human standards of the market. But he also learned that all too often even their bold idealism, their “positive willedness,” could be diverted from their chief end to the lesser ends of catching fish or securing more property. In *Walden* he combats this tendency by urging his neighbors not to make wealth or material comforts the standard by which they judged the success of their lives but rather to judge themselves by how well they fulfilled the chief end for which God

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<sup>42</sup> Thoreau returns to the fact of great snows many times, including four times in *Walden* (*WA* 119, 128, 254, 265). See also his journal (*HMJ* 8: 42–43; 12/11/55; 8: 230; 3/28/56), *Cape Cod* (*CC* 40), and “The Dispersion of Seeds” (*Faith in a Seed* 98).

designed them. Thoreau's imaginative breakthrough comes when he extends this Puritan rhetoric and argues that if God's design for humans is the measure of a good human life, then his design for other creatures should be the measure of what constitutes their good life. For whatever reason—perhaps because of a perceived super-abundance of natural resources or their more pressing concern to establish a pure, primitive church—the Puritan settlers failed to carefully articulate the connection between their spiritual ends and the divine ends of the creatures around them, so they typically used the New England wilds as William Wood described them, an array of natural resources chiefly valued according to their practical usefulness for humans.<sup>43</sup> But Thoreau realized that if human comforts are rejected as the standard of value for human lives, it makes little sense to use them as the standard of value for other creatures. The goal of his natural philosophy—which picked up where the Puritan naturalists left off—was to appreciate the particular ways in which various creatures were designed to enjoy God and bring him glory. Thoreau strove to understand and appreciate how God's whole creation served the end which the catechism taught that humans did. With this understanding, perhaps humans could not only more fully glorify and enjoy God themselves, but also enable the rest of creation to fulfill this same end.

Through his empirical observations, Thoreau continued to pursue the goal of Mather and Edwards in showing that the wild, New England creation reveals God's glory. Less than two years before his death, Thoreau returned to the first question of the catechism in a journal entry in which he railed against using science for grim, utilitarian purposes instead of as a means of glorifying God. This entry is provoked by a book

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<sup>43</sup> See especially Cronon (*Changes in the Land* 159–70) and Stoll (*Protestantism* 55–76) for details about the Puritans' use and abuse of natural resources.



Thoreau found in the library titled *Insects Injurious to the Vegetation of the State of Massachusetts*. He begins with a short, declarative sentence that echoes the Old Testament prophetic call to “Hear the Word of the Lord”:

*May 1. Hear the ruby-crowned wren.*

We accuse savages of worshiping only the bad spirit, or devil, though they may distinguish both a good and a bad; they regard only that one which they fear and worship the devil only. We too are savages in this, doing precisely the same thing. This occurred to me yesterday as I sat in the woods admiring the beauty of the blue butterfly. We are not chiefly interested in birds and insects, for example, as they are ornamental to the earth and cheering to man, but we spare the lives of the former only on condition that they eat more grubs than they do cherries, and the only account of the insects which the State encourages is of the “*Insects Injurious to Vegetation*.” We too admit both a good and a bad spirit, but we worship chiefly the bad spirit, whom we fear. We do not think first of the good, but of the harm things will do us.

The catechism says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, which of course is applicable mainly to God as seen in his works. Yet the only account of the beautiful insects—butterflies, etc.—which God has made and set before us which the State ever thinks of spending any money on is the account of those which are injurious to vegetation! This is the way we glorify God and enjoy him forever. Come out here and behold a thousand painted butterflies and other beautiful insects which people the air, then go to the libraries and see what kind of prayer and glorification of God is there recorded. . . . We have attended to the evil and said nothing about the good. This is looking a gift horse in the mouth with a vengeance. Children are attracted by the beauty of butterflies, but their parents and legislators deem it an idle pursuit. The parents remind me of the devil, but the children of God. Though God may have pronounced his work good, we ask, “Is it not poisonous?” (*HMJ* 12: 170–71; 5/1/59)

Thoreau’s statement that the catechism’s answer to the question of man’s chief end “is applicable mainly to God as seen in his works” clearly goes beyond the position Mather or Edwards would take. And yet he sees natural philosophy as a practice, like Mather declared at the beginning of *Christian Philosopher*, that humans should engage in so that they can better glorify and enjoy God. Thoreau would have agreed with Edwards and Mary Moody Emerson that “the end of creation was God’s glory,” and he hoped to

impart to his neighbors a sense of wonder at the New England creation so they could perceive in it God's beautiful, redemptive work. Thoreau condemns, just as he did in *Walden*, humans who fail to understand their chief end and so use science and technology to enrich themselves materially—in this case by killing insects that don't seem to further these too-narrow ends—rather than glorifying God. As one would expect, Thoreau has little hope that his society's institutions—the State, the library, or even parents—will attend to creation's beauty, but he thinks children might be “watchmen in the country of another sort—watching for the glory of God” (*PJ* 4: 315; 2/1/52). Maybe these childlike watchers can teach the rest of us how to properly enjoy God's works. So whenever Thoreau sees Americans using science in the tradition of those who came to New England only to catch fish and redeem the devil's territories, he calls them back to glorify God by enjoying his beautiful wildness.

In *Walden*, as we have seen, Thoreau similarly condemns those who use the natural world for their own ends without stopping to enjoy the way that the whole of creation participates in glorifying God. He describes Flint's Pond as polluted by the “grasping harpy-like” use of the farmer who nominally owned it (*WA* 195). Thoreau is incensed that the pond was named for this man “who never loved it, who never protected it, who never spoke a good word for it, nor thanked God that he had made it” (*WA* 196). Instead of enjoying the pond and its inhabitants for who they were made to be, this “skin-flint. . . . thought only of its money value” and how he could “redeem” its unprofitable waters by turning it into a pasture or “cranberry meadow” (*WA* 195, 196).<sup>44</sup> Thoreau

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<sup>44</sup> Thoreau uses “redeem” in a similar ironic way in both “Walking”—when he describes a farmer who plans to “redeem” a swamp “armed with plow and spade” (*EX* 207)—and “Wild Fruits”—when he recollects the wealth of blueberries that grew in a particular swamp before it was “redeemed” (*Faith in a Seed* 198).

condemns this farmer's narrow understanding of use because by using his wealth as the sole standard of value, he perverts both himself and this place from the religious ends for which they were made.<sup>45</sup> To redeem this perversion, Thoreau sought to understand the physical creation not in a way that enables human use, but in a way that elicits joy and reveals God's glory.

One of the obvious practical consequences of this view is Thoreau's insistence that some creatures should not be used by humans at all. In *The Maine Woods*, for instance, he responds to wasteful logging and moose-hunting by insisting that these human uses of other creatures are limited: "the pine is no more lumber than man is, and to be made into boards and houses is no more its true and highest use than the truest use of a man is to be cut down and made into manure. There is a higher law affecting our relation to pines as well as to men" (*MW* 121). Thoreau here implies that humans should not only, as Kant argued, treat other humans as ends rather than as means, but also recognize that non-human creatures have their own divine ends. Logging, then, is a "petty and accidental us[e]" of a pine tree because it is not the primary end for which God created it, and thus Thoreau concludes, "Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it" (*MW* 121). It is in the next paragraph that Thoreau claims the pine tree "is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven," the controversial statement

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<sup>45</sup> Thoreau's ideas about use and enjoyment are illuminated by what one twentieth-century American preacher has written regarding the ecological implications of the catechism's first question and answer: "Abuse is use without grace; it is always a failure in the counterpoint of use and enjoyment. When things are not used in ways determined by joy in the things themselves, this violated potentiality of joy . . . withdraws and leaves us, not perhaps with immediate positive damnations but with something much worse—the wan, ghastly, negative damnations of use without joy, stuff without grace, a busy, fabricating world with the shine gone off" (Sittler 97). This is the use of the natural world that Thoreau rejected as profane.

that the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* excised without Thoreau's permission, greatly angering him (Harding, *Days of Henry Thoreau* 392–94). Yet this high view of trees and other creatures is absolutely essential to the logic that Thoreau uses to urge the preservation of some wild places.

In his unpublished essay “Huckleberries,” Thoreau draws on this same religious conception of the purpose of trees when he criticize the Puritan settlers for not applying their ideals with more prudence and setting aside unique wild places for higher uses. Thoreau sees their failure to preserve natural places as a failure to apply their religious beliefs: “I am not overflowing with respect and gratitude to the fathers who thus laid out our New England villages. . . . If they were in earnest seeking thus far away ‘freedom to worship God,’ . . . why did they not secure a little more of it . . . ? At the same time that they built meeting-houses why did they not preserve from desecration and destruction far grander temples not made with hands?” (*Natural History* 253). As he does elsewhere, Thoreau judges the Puritans' actions by their own ideals and finds them wanting. He challenges his readers to act now to preserve wild places where they can have the freedom to worship God in the presence of this temple made of immortal beings.

But the ecological ethic Thoreau imagines is much more complex than simply setting aside tracts of wilderness where other created beings can achieve their highest ends and inspire us humans to do likewise. The fuller relationship between humans and other creatures that he portrays in essays like “Huckleberries” and “Wild Apples” is modeled on the kinds of symbiotic relationships he observes within the wild plant and animal communities. These proper relationships include use but are predicated on mutual enjoyment in which all participants bring glory to their creator. As Thoreau explains in

“Huckleberries,” he wants his readers to gratefully accept the givenness of nature without seeking to seize these gifts for their own ends: “Man at length stands in such a relation to Nature as the animals which pluck and eat as they go. . . . [The berries] seem offered to us not so much for food as for sociality, inviting us to pic-nic with Nature. We pluck and eat in remembrance of her. It is a sort of sacrament—a communion—the *not* forbidden fruits, which no serpent tempts us to eat” (*Natural History* 241). Thoreau compares this ideal ecological community with both the Edenic state and with the Lord’s Supper, emphasizing the religious basis of these proper relations. Ideally, humans are grateful for the creatures who die in order to sustain their physical lives in a way analogous to the Christian’s gratitude for Jesus’ death which gives spiritual life. By living this way humans can reenter Eden, where Adam and Eve lived from the abundant fruits of the Garden that God provided for them. The act of disobedience that disrupts this proper ecology is the human decision to be like gods and to make themselves the standard for good and evil. This is why Thoreau continually urges his readers to stop making their use of the natural world its absolute standard of value and to rather value others first of all for the ways in which God values them, their ability to enjoy and glorify their creator.

The statement with which Thoreau opens his explanation of this sacramental, Edenic ecology indicates his practical model for this form of relations. He says, “Man at length stands in such a relation to Nature as the animals which pluck and eat as they go.” Much of the careful observation he conducted in the last years of his life was devoted to understanding how animals use plants for their own needs while also enabling these plants to flourish. Squirrels and birds, in the process of gathering berries and seeds for their food, scatter the seeds of these plants and so perform an invaluable service for them.

This is the set of relationships that structures his unfinished manuscript on “The Dispersion of Seeds.” And Thoreau relishes showing how these animals enjoy their life and work and use plants in such a way that the plants’ needs are also met, enabling both species to achieve their higher ends. These are the wild, natural relationships to which Thoreau refers in his famous declaration that “[i]n wildness is the preservation of the world” (*Excursions* 202).

Thoreau’s reliance on wildness as the source of the higher laws to which human culture should adapt threatens at times to devolve into a romantic search for pure, primitive nature. This romantic view tends to reify the divide between nature and culture and so reinscribe a Puritan style dualism between the two. But Thoreau senses this danger, and his efforts to articulate a multifaceted way of “enjoying” other creatures bridge the poles of this dualism. By delighting in all creatures and finding ways to allow them to fulfill the ends for which they were created, humans can participate in God’s wild economy. Like the squirrels who spread seeds and also eat them, humans may be able to serve other creatures as well as live from them. Thoreau’s search for a form of use that is predicated on delight, then, marks his attempt to imagine a way of enjoying God in his works and participating in his wild order.

As Thoreau tried to practice this kind of enjoyment in his own life, he urged his neighbors to adopt this approach also. In his “Wild Fruits” manuscript, he attempts to teach readers to value these various fruits not merely for their physical sustenance, but also for their higher value: “The value of these wild fruits is not in the mere possession or eating of them. The very derivation of the word ‘fruit’ would suggest this. It is from the Latin *fructus*, meaning ‘that which is used or enjoyed’” (*Faith in a Seed* 180). Thoreau’s

hope is that humans will value the fruit primarily for the joy it brings, and that this valuation will change the way they use it. In Thoreau's terms, most human use of nature is not "use, but gross abuse" because we value only the profit nature can bring: "It is a grand fact that you cannot make the fairer fruits or parts of fruits matter of commerce, that is, you cannot buy the highest use and enjoyment of them. You cannot buy that pleasure which it yields to him who truly plucks it. You cannot buy a good appetite even. In short, you may buy a servant or slave, but you cannot buy a friend" (*Faith in a Seed* 182). By treating other creatures as friends—and not commodities to serve humans' own ends—Thoreau hopes that people will appreciate the "evanescent and celestial qualities" of other creatures and so join with them in enjoying and glorifying God (*Excursions* 266).

Thoreau is not naïve; he knows living this way is difficult. But as he urges in "Wild Apples," people can begin by being grateful for God's good creation: "It would be well, if we accepted these gifts with more joy and gratitude" (*Excursions* 267). This gratitude, which results from understanding the true value of other creatures, should then lead them to recognize that "the true fruit of Nature can only be plucked with a fluttering heart and a delicate hand" (*Natural History* 252). Or, as he puts it in *The Maine Woods*, "our life should be lived as tenderly and daintily as one would pluck a flower" (120). Thoreau finds that when he lives with this attentive care toward the creatures around him, he inhabits an Edenic Promised Land: "I seem to have wandered into a land of greater fertility—some up country Eden. These are the Delectable Hills. It is a land flowing with milk and huckleberries" (*Natural History* 244). As at the end of *Walden*, where Thoreau's mode of history enabled him to see himself as part of a divine covenant—signaled by the rainbow and his halo—so here he finds this mode of perception and

action brings him to the Promised Land. This is the covenantal blessing that awaits those who value New England's creation not by the human standards of the market but rather by God's wild economy in which all participants may enjoy and glorify God.

Thoreau wants his fellow Americans to realize that this possibility of living in a Promised Land is part of their precious inheritance. But he fears that they will fail to sufficiently value it. Repeatedly, then, he turns to the biblical story that shows most starkly the dangers of improperly valuing one's place in a divine covenant: the story of Esau selling Jacob his birthright for a mess of pottage. In an early journal entry, Thoreau ponders the difficulty of living an earnest life and notes ironically that most men would sell this responsibility for commercial gain: "Of all the duties of life it is hardest to be in earnest; it implies a good deal both before and behind. . . . Cannot man do something to comfort the gods, and not let the world prove such a piddling concern? No doubt they would be glad to sell their shares at a large discount by this time. Eastern rail-road stock promises a better dividend" (*PJ* 1: 321; 8/18/41). In *A Week* he berates barren learning that does not lead to "hymns or psalms," declaring, "Scholars are wont to sell their birthright for a mess of learning" (*A Week* 96). And in "Life without Principle" he condemns those who exert themselves only to get a living and do not have enough strength left to live: "I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage" (*RP* 160). In "Huckleberries" he laments those with "utilitarian eyes" who "do not care for Nature, and would sell their share in all her beauty, for as long as they may live, for a stated and not very large sum. . . . It is for the very reason that some do not care for those things that we need to continue to protect all from the vandalism of a few"



(*Natural History* 256).<sup>46</sup> The story to which Thoreau alludes foregrounds the choice we must make between living according to divine values or market values. Esau failed to value his spiritual inheritance—the covenant God had made with his ancestors, which included the gift of a Promised Land—and so he gave it away in exchange for immediate, material comfort. Several British Romantic poets used this story to describe their own birthright as “a kind of original pastoral harmony with nature” (David L. Jeffrey, “Birthright” 91),<sup>47</sup> but this story takes on added significance in the American context where early English settlers saw themselves as the new Israel coming to receive their Promised Land.

Thoreau believed he and his neighbors had inherited a position in a divine covenant and yet were in danger of selling this spiritual birthright for quick material profits. He rejected much of the Puritans’ theology, but by tracing his country’s tracks back through history, Thoreau learned to adapt Puritan ways of seeing the natural world to help his contemporaries rightly understand their place in God’s wild temple. His use of the Puritan modes of history and natural philosophy, then, were intended to help his neighbors properly see and value that natural world. Perhaps, if they too would become “watchmen . . . watching for the glory of God,” they could be “elevated for an instant upon Pisgah” and could enter a Promised Land where they would join all of creation in enjoying and glorifying God.

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<sup>46</sup> In the journal entry from which this essay is drawn, Thoreau figures such people would sell their share in Nature “for a glass of rum” (*HMJ* 14: 306–07; 1/3/61).

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey notes one of Thoreau’s references to this biblical story as well as uses of it by Hawthorne and later American authors.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Preserving “God’s Wildness” for Redemptive Baptism: Muir and Disciples of Christ Theology<sup>1</sup>

“Heaven knows that John Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God’s mountains.”

—Muir, *John of the Mountains* 86

“[A]lthough the page of Nature is so replete with divine truth, it is silent concerning the fall of man and the wonders of Redeeming Love,” wrote a twenty-seven year old John Muir in a letter to his good friend Jeanne Carr. “Might she not have been made to speak as clearly and eloquently of these things as she now does of the character and attributes of God?” (*Kindred* 34). Muir wrote this letter from Meaford, Canada, where he had traveled to botanize and where he was staying with members of the local Disciples church. As his letter indicates, Muir was enthusiastic about learning from nature and yet felt compelled to apologize for his apparent slight of the written Word of God: “It may be a bad symptom, but I will confess that I take more intense delight from reading the power and *goodness* of God from ‘the things which are made’ than from the Bible. The two books, however, harmonize beautifully, and contain enough of divine truth for the study of all eternity” (*Kindred* 34–35).<sup>2</sup> Muir had studied the Bible diligently as a child, albeit under the duress of his father’s whip, and he claimed that by the age of eleven he had committed to memory “about three fourths of the Old Testament and all of the New by heart and by sore flesh” (*Writings* 1: 27). Now, however, he

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<sup>1</sup> A portion of this chapter is forthcoming in *Christianity and Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> Muir quotes here from Romans 1:20.

wanted to turn his attention to the Book of Nature, but in order to justify this choice, he had to learn how to see God's love in his works. Thoreau may have been content to see God's glory in the beauty of creation, but Muir insisted that creation must also reveal the redemptive love of its creator. While in this letter he admits that he had not yet found "Redeeming Love" written in nature, the following years of study and travel convinced Muir that God's wild creation, like the Bible, communicates his redeeming love. The redemptive power he found in nature so excited Muir that he became an impassioned prophet, proclaiming the power of the "woody gospel" to the whole nation (*Kindred* 120).

While much Muir scholarship has downplayed the importance of his Christian upbringing on his mature ecological ethics, over the last twenty years more scholars have begun to recognize some of the Christian theology that undergirds Muir's writing. What remains little understood, however, is the way the distinctive theology of the Disciples of Christ prepared Muir to understand nature as an agent of egalitarian, unifying, and primitive redemption. During his formative thousand-mile walk, he based his criticisms of selfish anthropocentric attitudes on his belief that the universe was made for God, not man. Arriving in Yosemite with this perspective, Muir read in its glacial origins, origins that made it literally "born again" (*Writings* 4: 17), the redemptive love of its Creator. Glaciers formed this landscape by an egalitarian, unifying baptism that created a primitive, redeemed wilderness, and Muir found that by immersing himself in the Sierra he could partake in its divinely natural redemption. This wild baptism imparted a more effective redemption than even the baptism offered by the Disciples, so Muir preached "the gospel of glaciers" (*JMP* 34: 2131), seeking to bring as many people as possible to

the wilds where they would be cleansed by divine love. Because Muir feared some people were too “incrust[ed]” by civilization to participate in wild religion, he developed a passionate rhetoric to directly immerse his readers in “Godful beauty” (*Writings* 1: 228). The particular preservationist ethic, therefore, that led Muir to support the National Parks and to fight the damming of Hetch Hetchy flowed from his belief, forged in his early years in the Sierra, that God’s love was most clearly revealed in wilderness and that humans could be redeemed by baptism in God’s wilds.

This may seem like an overly Christian reading of “the central figure in the history of American conservation” (Fox 28), but it takes into account Muir’s particular upbringing, the rhetoric he used throughout his career, and the ethical principles to which he devoted his life. In the early 1980s two Muir biographers, Stephen Fox and Michael Cohen, presented a de-Christianized version of John Muir that fit the ethos of the growing environmental movement.<sup>3</sup> These portrayals of Muir as a pantheist or Eastern mystic were quickly questioned by scholars such as Ronald Limbaugh, who argued that “the bane of most of Muir’s recent biographers” has been their “failure to differentiate between Christian apostasy and anti-denominationalism” (19).<sup>4</sup> Limbaugh claimed Muir was in fact a “Christian reformer,” and after his essay, interpreters of Muir tend to follow his rather general definition of Muir’s religious beliefs (20). Some, like Max Oelschlaeger, continue to portray Muir’s theology as “evolutionary pantheism” (*The Idea of Wilderness* 173), and some like Don Weiss and Bron Taylor, see his Christianity only

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<sup>3</sup> Fox claims that “Muir made a permanent break from Christianity” (359), and Cohen argues that he rejected “the false and abstract doctrines of Christianity” (*The Pathless Way* 25).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Stoll also critiques Cohen’s view of “Muir as a kind of Western Taoist” because this “interpretation . . . removes Muir from his historical context” (“God and John Muir” 80 n. 8).

as a rhetorical veneer (Weiss 120).<sup>5</sup> Others, however, have recognized that Christian theology deeply informs Muir's writing and so have attempted to position Muir within particular Christian traditions: Mark Stoll within the "theism of liberal Protestantism" (*Protestantism* 145),<sup>6</sup> Robert Dorman within "*Christian naturalism*" (13), and Dennis Williams within "mystical Christianity" and "the nineteenth-century Evangelical Protestant tradition" ("John Muir" 83; *God's Wilds* xi).<sup>7</sup> While these critics gain valuable insight into Muir and his ecological ethics by viewing his writing through the lens of various Christian traditions, they each fail to pay careful attention to the particular denomination in which Muir was raised.

Without understanding the specific Christian community in which Muir grew up, readers risk misunderstanding the import of his frequent religious metaphors. So while Adam Sowards is partially correct when he argues, "to label Muir as within or outside a tradition obscures his complexity and perhaps distorts the real contribution he made with his unique spiritual environmentalism" (124), this ahistorical approach enables critics to remake Muir in their own image and so miss the original contributions he made to his religious tradition and to the history of ecological ethics. Muir certainly engaged

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<sup>5</sup> Bron Taylor admits that there are "contending interpretations of Muir's spirituality" but concludes that "the preponderance of evidence suggests that Muir's tendencies were first and foremost animistic and pantheistic." Thus he concludes about Muir's biblical rhetoric that "Muir thought it politically useful to use language that would be compelling to the various publics he sought to enlist in the cause of environmental protection, which included romantics, transcendentalists, and theists" (62). Robert Fuller portrays Muir as a pantheist (51), and Adam Sowards follows Weiss and Taylor in reading Muir's Christianity as merely a vocabular inheritance.

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Stoll also places Muir in the Reformed Protestant tradition because of his indebtedness to Milton ("Milton in Yosemite" 238, 259-63).

<sup>7</sup> In her review of Williams' book, Bonnie Gisel rightly questions his reliance on the 1619 Belgic Confession, which Muir may not have even been aware of (251). This is one such example of Williams' inattention to the nuances of Muir's particular tradition in an otherwise excellent book.

multiple intellectual movements, including Romanticism and Transcendentalism,<sup>8</sup> and while he eventually rejected organized religion, his ecological ethics and literary imagination remained deeply indebted to Disciples of Christ theology.

In the same way that Thoreau's inheritance of Puritan genres enriches our understanding of how and why he made himself attentive to wild processes, Muir's inheritance of Disciples' theology reveals why he valued wild places and urged his fellow Americans to protect them. In particular, the Disciples of Christ hoped to restore primitive Christianity—by which they meant a Christianity in keeping with the spirit and practice of the early, New Testament church—by returning to a more egalitarian, unified form of church. This desire for a pure, original church coincided with the Romantic elevation of primitive nature as a pure origin for culture. Both movements were suspicious of what they saw as corrupt human tradition and so wanted to recover an uncorrupted, unfallen source. Yet both remained troubled by the difficulty of grasping any untainted origin: both the church and nature are always messily entangled with fallen humans. Despite the challenges of this pursuit, Muir searched tirelessly for a pure source of religion in primitive nature, and his combination of these two related movements retained a distinctly Disciples shape. The primitive wilderness he looked for would be a place of redeeming love where all could come together as equals in communion with their Creator. Because Muir's writings were so influential in shaping the formation of the

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<sup>8</sup> See Michael Branch for an analysis of Muir's engagement with the Romantic tradition ("Telling Nature's Story"), and while several critics link Muir to Emerson, Catherine Albanese also positions Muir as a Transcendentalist (*Nature Religion in America* 101–05), and Robert Dorman examines the way that Muir borrowed and departed from the Transcendental tradition as a whole (112–117). Sowards attempts to position Muir within both these traditions. Richard Fleck compares the maturation in both Thoreau and Muir's attitudes toward Native Americans.

National Parks, American attitudes toward wilderness remain stamped by Muir's imagination and the Disciples' theology that shaped it.<sup>9</sup>

*Growing Up in the Disciples Community*

Daniel Muir, John's father, was a prosperous businessman in Dunbar, Scotland when he heard Alexander Campbell preach and decided to immigrate to America to join the growing Restoration Movement, also known as the Stone-Campbell movement or the Disciples of Christ (Worster, *Passion* 37–38). Daniel moved his family to Wisconsin where he started a farm and preached in local congregations. He drove his children, especially John, to work hard on the farm, and his harsh parenting and later estrangement from John have led many critics to see his influence on his son in only negative terms.<sup>10</sup> Yet as Dorman rightly notes, critics who refer to John's "clean" (Sowards 133) or "bitter break" (Fox 41) with his father overlook the formative influence Daniel's denomination had on John (112–13). In fact, as Donald Worster argues, John "follow[ed] in his father's footsteps with remarkable faithfulness" (*Wealth* 194).<sup>11</sup> Mark Stoll makes a similar argument from a psychological standpoint: "Across all of Muir's life and works lay the shadow of one man, without whom both Muir's boundless drive and departure from the religious mainstream are nearly inconceivable: his father, Daniel" ("God and John Muir")

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<sup>9</sup> For a sense of how deeply Muir influenced the National Park idea and American thinking about wilderness, see the documentary by Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to Sowards and Fox, see also Badè who claims, "Obviously, it was not in his Wisconsin home that Muir was taught to bring nature within the purview of his religion" (10–11), and John Gatta who perceives Muir's "escape" from his father as a prelude to "walk[ing] away from the God of his cultural inheritance" (*Making Nature Sacred* 148).

<sup>11</sup> In his biography of Muir, however, Worster, seems to argue that Muir's rejection of his father was more complete (*Passion* 53–54, 115–16).

72).<sup>12</sup> While Stoll views this succession primarily in psychological terms and Worster views it in vocational terms—“John Muir became a kind of frontier evangelist himself” (*Wealth* 194)—John also followed his father theologically.

While John characterizes his father Daniel as a stern disciplinarian in his autobiography, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth* (1913), he also records instances of his father drawing attention to God’s revelation of himself in creation. Once Daniel showed his family a wood duck he had shot, telling them, “Come, bairns, and admire the work of God displayed in this bonnie bird. Naebody but God could paint feathers like these” (*Writings* 1: 119). Later, during an exceptionally impressive display of the northern lights, Daniel again instructed his family to “Come! Come, mother! Come, bairns! and see the glory of God. All the sky is clad in a robe of red light. . . Hush and wonder and adore, for surely this is the clothing of the Lord himself, and perhaps He will even now appear looking down from his high heaven” (*Writings* 1: 164).<sup>13</sup> While Daniel appreciated the beauty of creation, John’s view of God’s revelation in nature certainly went beyond his father’s. After John left home and began his explorations in Yosemite, Daniel wrote him a letter making his disapproval of John’s work quite clear, “All that you are attempting to show the Holy Spirit of God gives the believer to See at one glance of the eye. . . It is of no use to look through a glass darkly when we have the Gospel & its

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<sup>12</sup> While Stoll does not consider Daniel’s particular theological inheritance closely, he does claim that the “strongest similarity between Muir and his father is that each rejected an orthodox religion and preached the Gospel according to his own lights—for Daniel the Campbellite Gospel, for Muir the Gospel of Nature” (“God and John Muir” 73).

<sup>13</sup> John Pierce also discusses how Daniel’s hermeneutic influenced his son, pointing out that when Daniel wanted to become a vegetarian based on the natural design of human teeth, John used the Bible to convince him that God intended humans to eat meat (*Writings* 1: 194–95). This shows the way in which the Restoration Movement encouraged the use of nature as a guide, even while the Bible remained the highest authority.



fulfillment” (19 Mar. 1874). John’s belief in the gospel of glaciers irked his father, who would have preferred that John devote his attention to the biblical revelation rather than the created one. Nevertheless, Daniel modeled for his son a reverent attitude toward the natural world and showed him that God could be seen in creation’s beauty.

In addition to his father’s teaching, John was widely exposed to Disciples’ theology throughout his formative years: he read many religious books and Disciples’ pamphlets while living at home (*Writings* 1: 192–93; Fox 34–35), and he worked at a rake factory in Canada owned by a fellow Disciples family, the Trouts (Turner 116–18). One of the Trout brothers John Muir worked with, Peter, remembers the first time he met Dan Muir, John’s brother who was botanizing with him while evading the Civil War draft. While the Trouts were initially cautious about this stranger looking for work, “the situation . . . was very much improved when we learned that [Dan], and his people, belonged to the same church we did, that is the Disciples, or the Cambelites [sic] as they used to be called” (306–07).<sup>14</sup> According to Peter, the Muir brothers attended church with the Trout family, which typically involved going to both a morning and evening service (307–08). In an autobiographical fragment written in 1908, Muir claims that during his time in Meaford his “Sundays and long summer evenings were devoted to the plants and rocks” (*Autobiography* 3), but since he wrote home about the success of some evangelistic meetings being held at the church (“Letter to David and Sarah Galloway” 23 Oct. 1865), it seems likely that he attended at least part of the time. Muir’s church attendance had apparently already begun to lapse in his college years; his college

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<sup>14</sup> For a history of the Disciples congregation in Meaford, Canada, see Claude Cox’s “The Division Between Disciples and Churches of Christ in the Disciples Church at Meaford, Ontario. (*Writings* 1: 194–95)” For another account of Muir’s years with the Trout family, see William Trout’s *Trout Family History* (121–38).

roommate recollected that “While he was not a very regular attendant at church, he read his Bible and said his prayers morning and evening of every day and he led the kind of life that all this imports” (Vronman 561). Despite his growing distance from the organized church, Muir read the Disciples publications *The Christian Messenger* (*Writings* 9: 137) and *The Millennial Harbinger* for years after he left home (Holmes 59). He also maintained a correspondence with various members of the Trout family until his death, and the eldest brother, William, continued to write to him about church matters.<sup>15</sup> During his adult years, Muir never explicitly rejected or affirmed a particular religious faith, and even after he stopped attending church and sought a more inclusive, non-sectarian Christianity in the wild Sierra, Disciples theology continued to undergird his rhetoric and ethics.

Despite Muir’s upbringing among the Disciples of Christ, Muir scholars have largely overlooked or mischaracterized this group’s distinct theology. Many critics, indeed, refer to Muir’s father simply as a “Calvinist,”<sup>16</sup> yet the Disciples rejected key elements of Calvinism, and as Muir’s early biographer Linnie Marsh Wolfe points out, “Daniel disagreed violently with the Calvinistic doctrine of election” (21). Some scholars, like Steven Holmes and Donald Worster, portray the Disciples more accurately, but very few actually investigate the importance of their influence on Muir.<sup>17</sup> Patricia

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Trout describes an extensive correspondence between Muir and the various Trout siblings (314), although many of these letters seem to be lost. William writes to Muir about church matters in several later letters, see especially 14 Apr. 1887, 2 Aug 1904, and 15 Feb. 1913.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Devall and Sessions (47), Limbaugh (16, 18), Oelschlaeger (*The Idea of Wilderness* 177, 182), Sheats (43), and Tallmadge (62).

<sup>17</sup> Holmes also points out that the Campbellites rejected important parts of Calvinism (58–59), and Worster describes the Campbells’ theology more accurately as the “amalgamation of two quite contrary tendencies: Enlightenment rationalism, which denounced all tyranny over the individual human mind, and evangelical piety, or what we would now call fundamentalism” (*Wealth* 192). He perceives the tension

Roberts is the exception, and she argues compellingly that Muir’s interpretation of nature employs the hermeneutic rules Alexander Campbell develops for reading the Bible. The success of her approach suggests that a broader analysis of Muir’s inheritance from the Disciples may deepen our understanding of how Muir’s ecological imagination developed from this tradition. For even though Muir’s mature writings do not articulate a fully developed theology—and if they did it would not be one to which Campbell would subscribe—their language and underlying premises are shaped by this theology.

In 1809 Thomas Campbell published the *Declaration and Address*, which formed the theological foundation for the fledgling movement he and his son Alexander had started.<sup>18</sup> This text called the Protestant church to reform, and in it Campbell emphasized three qualities he hoped to restore to the church: “each man’s right of private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture, . . . the peaceable unity among Christians that will come with the universal recognition of this right, and . . . the exact conformity of the church to ‘the express letter of the law’ as laid down in the New Testament” (Garrison and DeGroot 149). The emphasis on egalitarian, individual biblical interpretation was the means by which Campbell intended to achieve “the union of all Christians in one undivided church by the restoration of the primitive faith and practice as exhibited in the New Testament” (Garrison and DeGroot 550). While these dual goals of unity and primitive purity would sometimes cause conflict, they continued to shape the Disciples church as it grew through the nineteenth century.

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within the movement without focusing enough on the desire for Christian unity that led to these two tendencies.

<sup>18</sup> Conversations with both John Pierce and Tom Olbricht have clarified my understanding of Disciples theology.

The Disciples' egalitarian beliefs led them to reject creeds or church hierarchies as authoritative and instead proclaim that individuals were responsible only to the Bible. Their reliance on biblical authority and an interpretation based on "Baconian" induction justified their belief that the Bible should "be interpreted freely in accordance with individual conscience and rational study" (Hughes and Allen 153; Straughn 274). Campbell dealt with the problem of the Bible's apparent ambiguity by formulating a method, which Patricia Roberts terms "Biblical empiricism" (32), that consisted of a set of seven rules by which each person could read the Bible and come to the same interpretation (*Christian System* 16–17). He concludes these rules of inductive reading by stating that the reader "*must come within the understanding distance*" (*Christian System* 17); any reader who is close to God and who employs Campbell's rational, inductive method of reading will be able to understand God's biblical revelation. This resulted in a decentralized ecclesial structure that gave each Christian responsibility and authority. As historian Richard Harrison explains: "The Campbell-Stone movement . . . defended a level of freedom of opinion and inquiry in the church that was rare in the nineteenth century" ("Nailed" 55). In fact, the Disciples allowed "all baptized Christians . . . to administer the sacraments," indicating how seriously they took this egalitarian freedom and "the priesthood of all believers" (Harrison, "Early Disciples" 86).

The Disciples held this egalitarian stance on biblical interpretation because they believed that divisions in the Christian church were caused by manmade creeds, traditions, and doctrines. They hoped that by throwing out these schismatic false authorities, the church could be unified around the Bible as Christ intended. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Campbells and other early leaders did not want to

form a new denomination but instead, as Thomas Campbell put it, “restore unity, peace, and purity, to the whole church of God” (5).<sup>19</sup> Even after the Disciples of Christ formed as a separate denomination, they continued ecumenical efforts to restore apostolic unity to the Christian church. While in practice the movement was plagued by the divisions that mark American Protestantism, their anti-sectarianism and desire for Christian unity contained the seeds of John Muir’s radically open, inclusive faith.

The Disciples believed this unity could be achieved both through an inductive, individual interpretation of the Bible and through recovering the original practices of the New Testament church (Hughes and Allen 157). In many ways, the Restoration Movement’s emphasis on restoring the church to its primitive purity is quite similar to the motivations of many American Protestants, including the Puritan colonists.<sup>20</sup> What set the Disciples apart from most other denominations, however, was their anti-creedal stance and their belief that the church’s purity could best be restored by practicing the ordinances commanded in the New Testament: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the Lord’s Day (Fife 579). Their reliance on primitive church ordinances to overcome doctrinal differences offered Muir a liturgical method for uniting people as he developed his natural religion.

Examples of all three Disciples ordinances can be found in Muir’s writings, but baptism in particular formed his imagination. Alexander Campbell’s explanation of

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<sup>19</sup> See also W. Clark Gilpin’s analysis of the early Disciples effort to restore “*the integrity of the church*” (30–37).

<sup>20</sup> Hughes and Allen note that, this impulse toward restoring primitive purity is not exclusive to the Disciples but is also more broadly characteristic of American Protestantism (xiii). As Edward Johnson says, the Puritans came to the New World “that they might enjoy Christ and his Ordinances in their primitive purity” (A2). And Mather explains that they “came into a *Wilderness* for that very end, that hence they might be free from humane *Additions* and *Inventions* in the Worship of God, and might practice the *positive part* of Divine *Institutions*, according to the Word of God” (*Magnalia* 70).

baptism's significance explains the reputation the Disciples earned for having "a sacramental view of religion" (Wrather 964):

Rather remember the sacrifice of a body on Mount Calvary, and talk not lightly of bodily acts. There is no such thing as outward bodily acts in the Christian institution; and less than in all others, in the act of immersion. Then it is that the spirit, soul, and body of man become one with the Lord. Then it is that the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comes upon us. Then it is that we are enrolled among the children of God, and enter the ark, which will, if we abide in it, transport us to the Mount of God. (*Christian System* 247)

Such a sacramental view of physical life, and of baptism particularly, was uncommon among nineteenth-century Protestants, and it clearly militates against any body/spirit dualism. It is this high view of the apostolic ordinances that Campbell hoped could lead to unity among the denominationally fragmented American church.<sup>21</sup>

The way Alexander Campbell and the Disciples understood baptism, however, caused increased conflict with other Protestant churches (Baird 176; Hughes and Allen 179). In Campbell's interpretation of the Bible, believers should be baptized by immersion and this act of baptism accomplished their salvation and imparted the gift of the Holy Spirit (Hicks 38–39; Harrison, "Early Disciples" 61). While other denominations located assurance of salvation in inward signs or a faithful Christian life, Campbell taught that anyone who had been baptized in faith in Jesus could be assured of their salvation (Foster, Blowers, and D. N. Williams 57). The controversies this view elicited led Alexander Campbell to write a whole book on baptism in which he ascribed to the act of baptism key, transformative powers: "In our baptism, we are born into the divine family, enrolled in heaven. We receive justification or pardon, we are separated or

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<sup>21</sup> John Hicks discusses the similarities and differences between Campbell's view of the sacraments and other Christian traditions (43–48).

sanctified to God, and glorified by the inspiration of his own Spirit” (*Christian Baptism* 276). As Campbell goes on to explain at length, this participation in “burial and resurrection with Christ” transforms the believer (*Christian Baptism* 275). Much more than just an initiatory rite, Campbell believed baptism was “a foundation for the Christian life of love, hope, and joy,” and he derived his understanding of Christian maturity and sanctification from this richly significant act (D. N. Williams 140). So although Campbell took pains to explain that people are not saved by baptism alone but also by faith and by Christ’s death and resurrection, many of his contemporaries felt Campbell’s emphasis on baptism for the remission of sin undermined the role faith plays in salvation (Foster, Blowers, and D. N. Williams 59–60).

While Campbell’s sacramental perspective did not achieve the united Protestant church he hoped it would, his theology did have a profound influence on the young John Muir who grew up in this fervent community. Even Muir’s “confess[ion]” to Carr that he preferred reading the Book of Nature to the Bible, finds a precedent in Campbell. Following Calvin’s *Institutes*, which begins with God’s general revelation in creation and then moves to his specific revelation in the Bible, Campbell opens *The Christian System* with a chapter titled “The Universe” and begins, “One God, one system of nature, one universe. That universe is composed of innumerable systems, which, in perfect concert, move forward in subordination to one supreme end” (*Christian System* 13).<sup>22</sup> Only after describing this divine “system of systems” that are “heterogeneous, though homogeneous,” distinct and yet all interrelated within the “heavenly hierarchies,” does

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin’s chapter on “The Knowledge of God Conspicuous in the Creation and Continual Government of the World” develops similar themes as Campbell’s chapter on “The Universe,” and both Calvin and Campbell then turn to the Bible as the proper guide to understanding the created world (Calvin 50–67).

Campbell move on to the Bible and its revelation of God (*Christian System* 13).<sup>23</sup>

Although Campbell believed that throwing out human tradition and following his seven rules for interpreting the Bible would enable all careful readers to agree with his interpretation of God and the universe, continued controversy within the Disciples of Christ proved this hope to be overly optimistic.<sup>24</sup> When Muir left home, then, he took with him Campbell's disdain for manmade creeds, his desire for spiritual unity based on an egalitarian, primitive, sacramental liturgy, and his belief in a divinely ordered, coherently interconnected natural world. Muir's turn to a more original, primitive revelation of God, then, extends Campbell's logic by, as Patricia Roberts demonstrates, applying Campbell's inductive, individual hermeneutic to the book of Nature (35–36).<sup>25</sup>

#### *Developing a Religious Cosmology on his Thousand-Mile Walk*

Muir's shift toward the natural revelation began while he was still at home, but his thousand-mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico enabled him to develop the contours of his theocentric view of nature. As a boy, Muir first learned from his father to see God's character manifested in nature. As Muir journeyed toward Florida, his botanical studies increasingly taught him to see nature as a potent revelation of God. One of the ways

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<sup>23</sup> Muir's discussion of nature as a harmonious palimpsest seems to borrow directly from this first chapter of Campbell's *The Christian System*: both portray a universe composed of discrete and yet harmonious parts, and both enjoin humility as the proper stance before such a divinely complex order (*Writings* 1: 356–57; *Christian System* 13–14).

<sup>24</sup> Garrison and DeGroot provide an overview of the main debates that threatened the Disciples' unity and the later split between the Disciples and the Churches of Christ (330–58; 404–07). George Marsden also discusses this later separation (178).

<sup>25</sup> Holmes notes another figure in the Disciples' tradition who applied Campbell's scriptural hermeneutic to nature: "James S. Lamar, whose *Organon of Scripture* (1859) was the culmination of early Disciples philosophy, claimed that the inductive method applies equally to the 'Book of Revelation' and to the 'Book of Nature'" (60–61). While Muir may or may not have known of Lamar specifically, his work demonstrates this tendency in Disciples theology.



God's natural revelation impressed Muir was with its piercing clarity. While walking through Florida, Muir observed the "Spanish bayonet, a species of yucca" (*Writings* 1: 351). He describes the effectiveness of its rhetoric in biblical terms: "woe to the luckless wanderer who dares to urge his way through these armed gardens after dark. . . . the bayonets will glide to his joints and marrow without the smallest consideration for Lord Man" (*Writings* 1: 352). Muir's allusion to Hebrews 4:12—"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow"—elevates the Book of Nature to the status of the Bible and indicates it has equal power to bring conviction to prideful readers or walkers.

In this passage, Muir focuses on the clearness and effectiveness of Nature's communication, but elsewhere in *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916) he links the redemptive teachings of nature with two of Christ's New Testament healings, suggesting that nature may be an agent of God's "Redemptive Love."<sup>26</sup> At the beginning of the fourth chapter, "Camping Among the Tombs," Muir describes his stay in Bonaventure cemetery and makes what seems like a casual reference to one of Christ's miracles: "If that burying-ground across the Sea of Galilee, mentioned in Scripture, was half as beautiful as Bonaventure, I do not wonder that a man should dwell among the tombs" (*Writings* 1: 299). Muir refers here to a demon-possessed man who lived naked and alone in a graveyard until Jesus came and exorcised his demons, freeing him to return

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<sup>26</sup> Holmes speculates that Muir wrote in his journal about his experiences in Bonaventure later, perhaps when he was convalescing in Florida after his bout with malaria (261–63). In any case, Badè's edition of *A Thousand-Mile Walk* reflects Muir's later revisions to his journal; both of these facts lend justification to a close reading of Muir's allusions in this section.

home and tell everyone what Jesus had done for him.<sup>27</sup> Muir's introductory allusion, then, leads the reader to expect that Muir might have a similarly transformative experience in this graveyard.

At this juncture in his journey, Muir is forced to wait near Savannah because some money his brother sent him has been delayed. Trapped in this dirty city, Muir feels possessed by the demons of civilization and retreats to the graveyard where the natural order survives in which life springs from death, as evidenced by the fecund plant growth around the graves: "the few graves are powerless in such a depth of life" (*Writings* 1: 302). Muir hopes that this quiet graveyard, like the one by the Sea of Galilee, will be a place of healing and restoration for him. As Muir wanders through the graveyard, the abundant plant and animal life contrast with the dead bodies in the soil and cause him to exclaim, "The whole place seems like a center of life. The dead do not reign there alone" (*Writings* 1: 309). Muir laments civilized views of death that see it only as the "arch-enemy of life," and this fertile graveyard elicits his opposite conception of death:

But let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony. (*Writings* 1: 302–03)

Muir's allusion is to I Corinthians 15, a chapter in which Paul writes at length on the implications of Christ's resurrection. Muir sees this same redemptive principle at work in the graveyard where grass repairs the ground disturbed by each burial mound and where corrosion "remed[ies]" the civilized incursions of tombstones and iron railings: "Life at work everywhere, obliterating all memory of the confusion of man" (*Writings* 1: 303).

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<sup>27</sup> This story to which Muir refers is told in three of the gospels; see Lk. 8:26-39 for one version.

Never content with merely observing the redemptive work of Nature, Muir decided to sleep in the graveyard since he had no money. It was, after all, safe from superstitious robbers. In his journal he writes that he was “conscious only of the Lord’s terrestrial beauty” that evening (*JMP* 23: 62). When he was ready for bed, he “found a little mound that served for a pillow . . . and rested fairly well, though somewhat disturbed by large prickly-footed beetles creeping across my hands and face, and by a lot of hungry stinging mosquitoes” (*Writings* 1: 306). With his typical good humor, Muir manages to sleep in spite of these friends, and when he wakes, he finds he has indeed participated in the resurrecting life of that place: “On rising I found that my head had been resting on a grave, and though my sleep had not been quite so sound as that of the person below, I arose refreshed, and looking about me, the morning sunbeams pouring through the oaks and the gardens dripping with dew, the beauty displayed was so glorious and exhilarating that hunger and care seemed only a dream” (*Writings* 1: 306–07). Muir’s comparison of himself to the dead person beneath him suggests that his sleep enabled him to participate in the natural redemption taking place in the graveyard. As these dead bodies are being raised into “gardens dripping with dew,” their rebirth affects Muir and enables him to rise refreshed.

Muir expands on this redemptive motif when, after describing the tiny shelter he built to keep the dew off him, he alludes to another of Christ’s miracles: “My whole establishment was on so small a scale that I could have taken up, not only my bed, but my whole house, and walked” (*Writings* 1: 307–08).<sup>28</sup> In the story Muir refers to, Christ first forgave the crippled man’s sins and then told him to take up his bed and walk, effecting

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<sup>28</sup> See Mark 2:1-12 for the miracle to which Muir alludes.

both a spiritual and physical healing. Seemingly, then, Muir's refreshing night of wild sleep absolved both his spiritual and physical infirmities. When in the next paragraph Muir finds a "cold-blooded creature," perhaps a "snake," in his bed and immediately throws it out, he signals his clear intention to keep his restored Eden free from temptation (*Writings* 1: 308).

Through his transformative experiences in this "blessed wilderness" (*Writings* 1: 309), Muir finds that nature does not only "speak" about "the wonders of Redeeming Love" but actually sacramentally imparts this love, cleansing the sin of humans who immerse themselves in its life. As he concludes in his journal, "I remained a week feasting on things spiritual, but with too little of the bread which perisheth" (*JMP* 23: 64). This graveyard episode suggests Muir was beginning to work out his belief that in a world created by a loving God, "[t]here is," as Campbell wrote, "no such thing as outward bodily acts" (*Christian System* 247).

As Muir continued his journey southward, he reflected on the human attitudes toward the natural world that impede its redemptive power. While some critics read these passages as Muir's rejection of the Christian God and an embrace of biocentric spiritualism, Muir's writing actually critiques the anthropocentric God of some Christians by comparing it with the foolish logic of a narrow biocentrism. Instead of either perspective, Muir advocates a theocentric view of the natural world that reveals human arrogance and the need for humans to submit to a divine plan.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I am indebted to Patrick Dooley in my understanding of the term theocentric. See his excellent essay in which he demonstrates the philosophical weaknesses of biocentric ethics, weaknesses that Muir's theocentric ethic avoids ("Ambiguity").

One of Muir's most sustained and oft-quoted critiques of anthropocentric attitudes comes near the end of his walk when he harangues those who believe that God's world "was made especially for man" (*Writings* 1: 354). Earlier, after joining one of his hosts in a deer hunt, Muir demonstrates the absurdity of the hunter's belief that the deer "were made for us": "As truthfully we might say on behalf of a bear, when he deals successfully with an unfortunate hunter, 'Men and other bipeds were made for bears, and thanks be to God for claws and teeth so long'" (*Writings* 1: 343). Muir's analogy directly condemns the Puritan view of Americans as God's chosen people, and in doing so, he illustrates the problem with an ecological ethic based on the "rights" of any one species; such an ethic has no way of balancing conflicting ethical claims and must decide by fiat on behalf of the privileged species. When in service to humans, this arrogant specisism can be used to justify killing "beasts," and in a jab at Manifest Destiny, Muir notes that such arrogance also legitimates killing "wild Indians." In a passage that reads as if it were a direct response to Johnson's claim that God turned the wilderness into a "Mart" for his churches, Muir decries "Lord Man" for his "selfish," narrow-minded attitude (*Writings* 1: 343).

Because of Muir's rejection of anthropocentric ethics, numerous critics have hailed him as an early proponent of "deep ecology" or "biocentric" thinking.<sup>30</sup> In this passage, Muir does come close to this position, but he advocates instead a theocentric view of creation in which humans must recognize their status as creatures and seek to

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<sup>30</sup> See Devall and Sessions (104–05), Wilkins (56), and Heffernan (104). Sowards largely agrees with Heffernan, arguing, "In essence, his criticism was against such hierarchy. Hierarchy led to the type of nineteenth-century utilitarianism Muir abhorred" (125). While Muir certainly disagreed with an anthropocentric hierarchy, he did not reject all hierarchy and simply wanted humans to place themselves in a proper hierarchy.

order their lives after “Creation’s plan.” Thus Steven Holmes more accurately describes Muir’s perspective here as a “profound religiocentrism” (237, 173–83). Muir explicitly justifies his valuation of each member of the ecosystem by claiming, like Campbell in the beginning of *The Christian System*, that everything is created and sustained for a divine purpose: “And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge” (*Writings* 1: 356–57). Like Thoreau, who urged his neighbors to consider the divine ends that other creatures might serve, Muir grounds his critique of anthropocentrism on his theocentric belief that each creature has a role in God’s cosmos; thus in Muir’s view, created beings derive their value from their place in God’s wild ecology. Drawing on a Miltonic monism, Muir claims that since every creature, including man, was made from the same “dust of the earth,” all creatures are “fellow mortals” (*Writings* 1: 357).<sup>31</sup> As Muir explains earlier, even alligators have a “wisely planned” place in “God’s family” (*Writings* 1: 324). Muir’s logic indicates that the ultimate moral standard should not be the desires of “Lord Man” or even merely the biosphere but rather “Creation’s plan” (*Writings* 1: 357). Since God creates and governs the universe, humans are responsible for submitting to his order, and instead of fighting for their individual rights, humans should participate in this divine order. When humans arrogantly assume that everything

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<sup>31</sup> Muir carried Milton’s *Paradise Lost* with him on this walk (*Writings* 1: 260), and Muir’s language reflects Raphael’s explanation to Adam that all things were created from “one first matter” (5.472). So while Turner and Holmes point out ways in which Muir breaks with Milton, it seems that on a fundamental level Muir found much to agree with in Milton’s epic (Turner 145–46; Holmes 186). This understanding of Muir’s relation to Milton is indebted to Christina Iluzada.

else exists for their pleasure, Muir wishes the race will be burned in a “transmundane furnace . . . so . . . as to smelt and purify us into conformity with the rest of the terrestrial creation.” This redemptive purification is needed because it is “the erratic genus Homo” that, through its sinful acts, most often disrupts the divine plan (*Writings* 1: 359). Muir here advocates a theocentric view of the cosmos according to which humans ought to subordinate themselves to the divine plan instead of pretending the universe revolves around their desires.<sup>32</sup>

As the logic of these passages makes clear, Muir’s valuation of non-human creatures, like Thoreau’s, depends on his theology, and thus assessments of Muir that overstate his rejection of his childhood faith misconstrue the rationale underlying his ethical thought. Max Oelschlaeger is mistaken, then, when he concludes: “Once freed of . . . creationism’s shackles, Muir began to realize that all things on earth, indeed, in the cosmos, are interrelated” (*The Idea of Wilderness* 194). In fact, Muir’s radical ecological perspective and ethics stem directly from his belief in a divine creator to whom self-centered humans need to turn for redemption. J. Callicott grasps the religious basis of Muir’s thinking and goes even further in his reading of this passage to claim, “According to Muir, . . . anthropocentrism is original sin.” While Callicott concludes indecisively that Muir’s reading of the Bible is either “theocentric, or . . . cosmocentric” (“Genesis and John Muir.” par. 101), his close reading of Genesis foregrounds Muir’s biblical justification for his seemingly unorthodox ethics. Given Muir’s emphasis here on “Creation’s plan,” and the redemptive overtones of his experience in the Bonaventure

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<sup>32</sup> While Richard Bauckham does not cite Muir in his green exegesis of Genesis, the theological position he develops is remarkably similar to the one Muir articulates in this passage (2-7).

graveyard, Muir clearly desires to restore humans to an original, pure relation with their “fellow mortals” and their Creator.

*Understanding the Glacier-Baptized Sierra*

During his walk to the gulf, Muir began to articulate his theocentric understanding of nature and to experience the redemptive power of nature’s “grand palimpsest” (*Writings* 1: 377). This image connotes Muir’s view of nature as a primitive, still-being-written manuscript; God is at work now, offering attentive observers the opportunity to read his fresh handwriting. It was not until he came to the Sierra, however, that he fully realized the potential nature had to function as God’s palimpsest and so to accomplish Campbell’s goal of making God’s primitive revelation accessible to all. At one point, Muir directly compares glacial markings with the divine writing on the wall in Daniel, marveling at the fresh revelations he finds in the rock walls of the Sierra: “Much notice has been taken of the writing on the wall of the Persian king’s palace, but there is a writing on every wall, and though, like palimpsests, these pages are written line upon line and crossed again and again, none of these old palimpsests is ever wholly obliterated, and no other effacement or obscurement is made save by the writing of other scriptures over those that have gone before” (*John of the Mountains* 88). Muir found God’s glacial revelation to be fresh and clearly intelligible; here is the primitive, intelligible text Campbell looked for in the Bible.

Most people would likely follow Perry Miller in seeing a sharp dichotomy between Thomas Campbell’s “revivalistic piety” and the “naturism more or less spiritualized” that unified nineteenth-century Americans by appealing across sectarian divides (*Nature’s Nation* 157), but Muir became such a potent figure in American



conservation efforts because he was able to bridge this divide. Campbell held that if all believers interpreted the Bible directly for themselves and worshiped together by means of primitive ordinances or sacraments, the church could be restored to an original and pure unity. Muir hoped that if all believers interpreted nature directly for themselves and worshiped together by means of wild, even more primitive sacraments, then everyone could be restored to a more original and pure union with God and with all of God's creation. Muir united Campbell's search for a primitive Christianity with the Romantic search for a primitive nature and declared that nature's pure sacraments could bring about a restored church.

As Muir studied the glacial origins of the Sierra, he interpreted the landscape through his inherited Disciples theology. Muir developed his geological acumen because, like Thoreau, he understood science as a method of reading and participating in God's creation, not as a way to explain and better manipulate the material world. Also like Thoreau, Muir's science remained focused on finding spiritual truths: in Muir's case, God's redemptive love. So even while Muir followed Campbell in claiming to discard all human tradition in order to "*come within the understanding distance*" and read inductively, he also followed Campbell in bringing his own biases to his interpretation; Muir's reading of the Sierra was inflected by the religious tradition in which he was raised. As Dennis Williams explains, "Muir interpreted Nature idealistically and deductively—despite his commitment to inductive methods in his nature studies. God created the Earth. The chief law of God revealed in the New Testament, the element of Christian scripture his Disciples of Christ heritage emphasized, was love. Therefore,

Nature revealed God's law of love" (*God's Wilds* 116).<sup>33</sup> This inconsistency in his method of geological reading—an inconsistency Muir shared with Campbell—led Muir, as Williams points out, to see God's love in nature. More precisely, Muir understood the glacially-formed Sierra as a resurrected, born-again landscape; for centuries these rocks had been buried under destructive ice, and yet this painful birthing process resulted in beauty and life. In addition, Muir discovered that when he immersed himself in this landscape, his baptism cleansed his civilized sins and redeemed him. Because he believed this mountain baptism could be more salvific than the baptism practiced in organized Christianity, Muir urged people to lose their corrupt, civilized lives in the wild mountains in order to be redeemed into a purified life.

When Muir entered the Sierra with his theocentric view of nature, his study of the mountains indicated to him that this range was not formed through some cataclysmic upheaval but rather through the slow process of glacial carving. Muir viewed glaciers, then, as divine instruments that revealed God immanently working out his predestined plan. Unlike Josiah Whitney, who denied that glaciers shaped Yosemite and the Sierra, "Muir believed that glacial landscape formation expressed the 'working of Divine harmonious law' better than Whitney's catastrophist argument" (D. Williams, *God's Wilds* 73).<sup>34</sup> Because of this belief, Muir referred to glaciers as divine agents: "Glaciers came down from heaven, and they are angels with folded wings" (*Kindred* 153). Muir echoes this language in many places, elsewhere calling them "hosts of icy ghosts" (*JMP*

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<sup>33</sup> For Muir's deductive reading of nature, see also Dennis Dean (190) and Patricia Roberts (36–40).

<sup>34</sup> For a more extended discussion of the disagreement between Muir and Whitney, see Worster or Wilkins (Worster, *Passion* 192–200; Wilkins 72–75). See also Paul Sheats's fine essay on Muir's religious reading of the glaciers, "John Muir's Glacial Gospel."

2: 1068) or “Holy Ghosts of glaciers” (*Kindred* 179), linking them to the person of the Trinity who “brooded” over the original creation and who imparts divine grace through baptism (Milton 1.21; A. Campbell, *Christian Baptism* 276; Hicks 37). These divine agents labor “harmoniously” to bring forth the “predestined beauty” of the landscape (*Writings* 4: 20). In one particularly expressive passage, he describes glaciers as “outspread, spirit-like, brooding above predestined rocks unknown to light, unborn” (“Yosemite Glaciers” 579).<sup>35</sup> As Muir explains at length in his “Studies in the Sierra,” the glaciers sculpt divinely predestined mountain ranges because their course is determined by the composition of the granite, laid down centuries earlier: “[Glaciers have] only developed the predestined forms of mountain beauty which were ready and waiting to receive the baptism of light” (“Studies in the Sierra: No. I” 403). Muir’s imagination of God as a “Great Master Builder” immanent and still involved in the ongoing plan of creation followed Emerson and Thoreau’s Transcendentalist ideas and concurred with a large contingent of Protestant thinkers who would turn to this conception of God as a way of integrating Darwinian science with Christian theology (*JMP* 34: 1989).<sup>36</sup> Consider, for example, Thoreau’s description of the thaw on the sandbank near the end of *Walden* where he feels himself to be “in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me” (306). Jon Roberts argues that while Protestants had believed in divine immanence since the Reformation,

it was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that a sizable number of American Protestant thinkers, committed to retaining the

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<sup>35</sup> Sheats also notes Muir’s allusion to Milton in this passage (48). Paul Willis, in his discussion of this description of glaciers, argues that Muir saw glaciers as instruments of God’s providence, enacting a “teleology of beauty” (3).

<sup>36</sup> For a more extended discussion of Muir’s engagement with Darwinism, see Worster (*Passion* 202–08) and Fox (81–82).

presence of divine agency in the natural world and convinced that the assumption that the scope of immediate divine activity was limited to events within natural history that defied scientific description would lead to spiritual disaster, made the immanentist conviction that ‘God is ever present and working in nature’ the ‘guiding conception of philosophical theology.’ (137)

Because he saw the glaciers as God’s tools by which he was still carving the Sierra peaks, Muir could proclaim that by climbing these mountains, “I will touch naked God” (*Kindred* 189). God, therefore, was not simply revealed in these glacially-carved peaks, he was present in them.

Muir’s descriptions of the “holy Ghosts of glaciers” demonstrate he conceived of them as egalitarian, unifying, restorative forces, thus establishing them as agents that could bring about the spiritual renewal sought by the Disciples of Christ. In the first chapter of *The Mountains of California* (1894), Muir concludes with a typical flourish by imagining the voices of the snowflakes that formed the mighty glaciers: “‘Come, we are feeble; let us help one another. . . . Marching in close, deep ranks, let us roll away the stones from these mountain sepulchers, and set the landscapes free” (*Writings* 4: 21–22). Muir figures the glaciers here as egalitarian, unified groups of individual snowflakes, and he also describes the resurrecting work they do as unifying. As he claims in one essay, “The key to this beautiful harmony is the ancient glaciers,” the common agent that formed apparently disparate features (*Writings* 4: 165). Near the end of *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), Muir reflects on what he has learned from his glacial studies: “The best gains of this trip were the lessons of unity and interrelation of all the features of the landscape revealed in general views” (*Writings* 2: 240).<sup>37</sup> Muir goes on to describe how

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<sup>37</sup> As Sheats explains, Muir valued the glaciers’ ability “to reveal the essential harmony of the natural world” (49).

the entire landscape, from the placement of lakes, forests, and meadows to the shape of the peaks, can be traced to glacial causes. Like the Disciples' belief that each believer could read the Bible individually and come to the same interpretation, so Muir saw each creature on the Sierra as offering a corroborative reading of the glaciers' work: "Every rock, mountain, stream, plant, lake, lawn, forest, garden, bird, beast, insect seems to call and invite us to come and learn something of its history and relationship" (*Writings 2*: 240–41). Muir transfers to his glacial gospel the Disciples' egalitarian belief that each believer should interpret the Bible, and so he tries to listen to each interpreter of nature's icy revelation.

The result of the glaciers' unifying work is the creation of a restored, primitive landscape: "This is still the morning of Creation. It is but yesterday since the ice-sheet was lifted from the Californian landscapes" (*JMP 34*: 1989). In *My First Summer*, Muir describes the newness of the Sierra by rewriting a quotation from Job 38:7: "Creation just beginning, the morning stars 'still singing together and all the sons of God shouting for joy'" (*Writings 2*: 213). In Job, the verbs are in the past tense, but Muir's sense of creation as ongoing causes him to place the action in the present. To emphasize the primitive status of the glacial-carved Sierra, Muir also likens it to Eden: "The last days of this glacial winter are not yet past, so young is our world. I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in contact with the new-made fields and plants of Eden; but I do so no more, because I have discovered that I also live in 'creation's dawn'" ("Explorations" 143). In the Sierra cloudscapes, "a new heaven and a new earth" are formed every day (*Writings 2*: 213). This "wholly new" world with its restored, "young

beauty” epitomizes the primitive, pure world to which the Disciples desired to return (“By-ways” 272).<sup>38</sup>

The Sierra glaciers, then, are fitting agents to bring about God’s redemptive beauty, and the method by which they worked suggested to Muir the potent Disciple ordinance of baptism. In the passage quoted above from *The Mountains of California*, Muir compares the glaciers to the divine power that raised Christ from the dead, describing them as “roll[ing] away the stones from these mountain sepulchers,” and elsewhere he refers to them as “ice-wombs” or “glacier wombs” through which the mountains are “born again” (“Studies in the Sierra: No VII” 69; *Writings* 4: 54): “These mighty agents of erosion, halting never through unnumbered centuries, crushed and ground the flinty lavas and granites beneath their crystal folds, wasting and building until in the fullness of time the Sierra was born again, brought to light nearly as we behold it to-day” (*Writings* 4: 17). Muir uses this phrase “born again” repeatedly, and later in *The Mountains of California*, he describes the glaciers as having effected the “regeneration of the Sierra” (*Writings* 5: 61). Muir’s links between resurrection, rebirth, and regeneration suggest the influence of Campbell, who writes in *The Christian System* that resurrection, “being born again,” regeneration, and immersion baptism are all equivalent:

“Regeneration is, therefore, the act of being born. Hence its connection always with water” (*Christian System* 201–02). The glaciers, then, reveal God redeeming the mountains through a long, slow baptism: the rocks are buried under frozen water, lose their former shape and character, and are eventually raised in far greater beauty. Since

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<sup>38</sup> This desire to return to a primitive Eden is certainly not unique to the Disciples. Stoll, for instance, traces Milton’s influence on how this strain of American thought shaped early perceptions of Yosemite (“Milton in Yosemite”).

Muir also figures these glaciers as “Holy Ghosts” (*Kindred* 179), the Sierra are indeed “born of water and of the Spirit” (A. Campbell, *Christian Baptism* 276; John 3.5).

Muir’s view of the glaciers’ redemptive work must be qualified, however, by his belief that nature remains unfallen. In *A Thousand-Mile Walk* Muir claims explicitly that the rest of creation was not damaged by the human fall (*Writings* 1: 324, 354–59).

Although at times he seems to question this—for instance when he considers savage ants, “When I contemplate this fierce creature so widely distributed and strongly intrenched, I see that much remains to be done ere the world is brought under the rule of universal peace and love” (*Writings* 2: 44)—Muir seems to largely maintain his view of non-human nature as unfallen. This belief led Muir to concur with Thoreau’s claim about the restorative power of wild creation; as Muir states in his Alaska journal while meditating on the living glaciers there, “In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness” (Thoreau, *Excursions* 202; *John of the Mountains* 317). Yet while the mountains themselves were not in need of redemption, Muir continually delighted in the way glaciers and the rest of nature formed beauty through painful, destructive processes: “Reading these grand mountain manuscripts displayed through every vicissitude of heat and cold, calm and storm, upheaving volcanoes and down-grinding glaciers, we see that everything in Nature called destruction must be creation—a change from beauty to beauty” (*Writings* 2: 229). In his later travels in Alaska, his study of the active glaciers confirmed his view of their redemptive effect: “out of all the cold darkness and glacial crushing and grinding comes this warm, abounding beauty and life to teach us that what we in our faithless ignorance and fear call destruction is creation finer and finer” (*Writings* 3: 323). So while Muir did

not see the glaciers as redeeming a fallen wilderness, he did see them as a preeminent example of God's ongoing, continuous re-creation into ever more glorious beauty.<sup>39</sup>

The glaciers' indomitable restorative force suggested to Muir the Christian truth, grounded in Christ's resurrection and participated in through baptism, that death is only a forerunner to life. The glaciers confirmed the ideas about death that he first developed on his walk to the Gulf. When Muir witnessed life and beauty springing from death and destruction, he interpreted it as an unfallen, naturally occurring testimony to the redemptive love that Christ preached:

The sermon of Jesus on the Mount is on every mount and every valley besides, unmistakable joy & confidence beams from mtn flrs redeeming the storms that fall upon them & the mtns on wh[ich] they grow from dominion of fear to love. They are great strong tremendously fateful John Baptists proclaiming the gospel of harmonious love in the cold realms of ice. Cassiope besides having a fair flower enjoying her own beautiful life is one of the most effective apostles of the gospel of glaciers. (*JMP* 34: 2131)

In the wilderness, Muir saw this love ruling without any evil hindering it; as he writes in his journal during the fall of 1872, "I never found the devil in the Survey nor any evil, but God in clearness and the religion of Jesus Christ" (*JMP* 23: 425). In this journal entry, Muir goes on to explain, "I find the sermon on the mount on every mount" and that the message Jesus preached in Palestine "shows that he knew all about the rocks and waters of our Californian Sierras and about the blessed angels that dwell in them." So the

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<sup>39</sup> See also Muir's journal entry where he speculates about how even human destruction may serve God's predestined, redemptive plan:

I often wonder what man will do with the mountains—that is, with their utilizable, destructible garments. Will he cut down all the trees to make ships and houses? If so, what will be the final and far upshot? Will human destructions like those of Nature—fire and flood and avalanche—work out a higher good, a finer beauty? Will a better civilization come in accord with obvious nature, and all this wild beauty be set to human poetry and song? Another universal outpouring of lava, or the coming of a glacial period, could scarce wipe out the flowers and shrubs more effectually than do the sheep. And what then is coming? What is the human part of the mountains' destiny? (*John of the Mountains* 215)



redemptive process by which the glaciers wrought beauty out of destruction, while not actually redeeming an unfallen landscape, proved to Muir that all of nature, even its seemingly terrible parts, “are but forms of that one bible utterance, ‘God is Love’” (“Letter to Maggie Lauder” 1 Mar. 1873).<sup>40</sup>

### *Preaching Mountain Baptism*

As Muir spent time among these glacier-baptized mountains, he experienced similarly powerful and transformative baptisms. And like the mountains’ glacial baptism, his baptism in the beauty of a loving wilderness was also *egalitarian*, because it was for all humans and indeed all creatures, *unifying*, because it brought all converts into sympathetic kinship, and *primitive*, because it restored each creature to their original state of purity. His own experience of the Sierra’s inclusive, original revelation convinced him that wild places offered a clearer and more powerful witness to God’s redeeming love than the Bible and the organized church. This belief led him to urge all who would listen to come and experience God’s wildness for themselves. Thus Muir’s impassioned writings were motivated and shaped by his belief in the redemptive power of mountain baptisms and his desire for each person to experience this primitive revelation of God.

Muir records several baptismal, redemptive experiences in his letters and articles, and a brief look at one of these will demonstrate the way Muir sought to lose himself in nature in order to allow the divine presence that was baptizing the mountains to baptize

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<sup>40</sup> John Tallmadge, then, misses the significance of Muir’s use of baptism imagery and his profound vision of nature as a redemptive sphere where, because all is governed by God’s predestined plan, life and beauty spring out of death and destruction: “Muir’s natural theology is one of liberation rather than redemption. . . . No savior is necessary: all we have to do is lift up our eyes unto the hills. In this natural religion there is no original sin and no overwhelming burden of guilt. No world-transforming sacrifice is required. In this sense, Muir’s new faith is profoundly un-Christian” (71). On the contrary, Muir’s natural theology is profoundly redemptive and, in this regard at least, deeply Christian.

him also.<sup>41</sup> In early 1871, Muir wrote a letter to Carr while sitting beside Upper Yosemite Falls on a moonlit night. He tells her that he had climbed up to “pray a whole blessed night with the falls and the moon,” but as he stood beside the falls, he was drawn closer to their “life and spirit”:

I went out somehow on a little seam that extends along the wall behind the falls. I suppose I was in a trance, but I can positively say that I was in the body, for it is sorely battered and wetted. As I was gazing past the thin edge of the fall and away through beneath the column to the brow of the rock, some heavy splashes of water struck me, driven hard against the wall. Suddenly I was darkened; down came a section of the outside tissue composed of spent comets. I crouched low, holding my breath, and, anchored to some angular flakes of rock, took my baptism with moderately good faith. (*Kindred* 136)

Just before this passage, Muir claims that he had lost control of his body, for while he was going to stay by the side of the falls, “somehow” he walked behind them. This loss of self-consciousness guides him in a “trance” to his baptism, which is administered by a host of water drops and which unites him to the natural world: “How significant does every atom of our world become amid the influences of those beings unseen, spiritual, angelic mountaineers that so throng these pure mansions of crystal foam and purple granite!” (*Kindred* 137). Muir tells Carr that he can’t keep himself from talking to the

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<sup>41</sup> Muir also describes his move to Wisconsin as a baptism in his autobiography:

This sudden splash into pure wildness—baptism in Nature’s warm heart—how utterly happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful glowing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us. Here without knowing it we still were at school; every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us. Oh, that glorious Wisconsin wilderness! Everything new and pure in the very prime of the spring when Nature’s pulses were beating highest and mysteriously keeping time with our own! Young hearts, young leaves, flowers, animals, the winds and the streams and the sparkling lake, all wildly, gladly rejoicing together! (*Writings* 1: 52–53)

This description employs similar themes as his experiences in the Sierra: loss of self, unity with nature, and rebirth into primitive, wild love. In an 1870 letter to Carr, Muir also records a baptismal experience: “Last Sabbath I was baptized in the irised foam of the Vernal, and in the divine snow of Nevada, and you were there also and stood in real presence by the sheet of joyous rapids below the bridge” (*Kindred* 114). He uses similar language in a letter to Catharine Merrill in describing one of his mountain rambles, “I ran up the mountain, ‘round to the top of the falls, said my prayers, received baptism in the irised spray and ran northward toward the head of the basin, full of faith” (*Writings* 9: 290).

water droplets around him and the bush beside him as he writes this letter to her; his baptism makes him feel that the material world is imbued with divine life. By forgetting himself and being immersed in the wild world, Muir experiences a transcendent unity with the rest of nature. This unity results in spiritual redemption; as he wrote in his journal about this same experience, “[I had] some of the earthiness washed out of me and Yosemite virtue washed in” (*John of the Mountains* 62).

Muir does not describe all of his redemptive experiences in terms of baptism, but nearly all of them contain this baptismal trajectory of being washed of “civilized sins” and ushered into communion with the rest of God’s unfallen creation. Sometimes, however, he drew on the other Disciples’ ordinances. Earlier, Muir wrote an ecstatic letter to Carr in which he used the Lord’s Supper to describe the intensity of his union with the Sequoia trees: “I’m in the woods, woods, woods, and they are in *me-ee-ee*. The King tree and I have sworn eternal love—sworn it without swearing, and I’ve taken the sacrament with Douglas squirrel, drank Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, and with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter” (*Kindred* 120). Muir generally found baptism a more apt sacrament to describe his redemptive experiences in creation, but here he draws on the other sacrament central to the primitive worship of the Disciples. Taking the Sequoia sacrament unites him with the woods and the Douglas squirrel, and later in his letter he describes its qualities in terms of biblical redemption: “There is a balm in these leafy Gileads,—pungent burrs and living King-juice for all defrauded civilization; for sick grangers and politicians; no need of Salt rivers. Sick or successful, come suck

Sequoia and be saved” (*Kindred* 120).<sup>42</sup> As this letter indicates, the redemption Muir experienced when he immersed himself in the Sierra was so potent that it could only be described in sacramental language.

Muir’s descriptions of Sabbath day celebrations with wild creatures are numerous. As with the rest of Disciples doctrine, Muir greatly expanded their idea of the Lord’s Day. As he wrote in his journal just before his first summer in the Sierra, “I used to imagine that our Sabbath days were recognized by Nature and that . . . there was a more or less clearly defined correspondence in the laws of nature with our own. But out here in the free unplanted fields there is no rectilinear sectioning of times and seasons” (*JMP* 23: 162).<sup>43</sup> This expansive view of the Sabbath freed Muir to see nearly all his time in the mountains as a long, exuberant celebration of the Lord’s Day. In *My First Summer in the Sierra* Muir constantly uses liturgical terms to describe his experiences: the various “songs” of the creeks and trees (*Writings* 2: 67, 89, 106, 118, 146, 213), the “psalms” sung by the wind and the water (*Writings* 2: 221, 104), the “congregation” of the mountains and the water (*Writings* 2: 14, 152, 154, 190), and the “choir of rills” (*Writings* 2: 251). The creatures around him often call him to worship: “Every morning, arising from the death of sleep, the happy plants and all our fellow animal creatures great and small, and even the rocks, seemed to be shouting, ‘Awake, awake, rejoice, rejoice, come love us and join in our song. Come! Come!’” (*Writings* 2: 67). This passage is strongly reminiscent of Milton’s morning prayer in *Paradise Lost* (Stoll, “Milton in Yosemite”

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<sup>42</sup> For biblical references to the balm of Gilead, see Gen. 37:25 and Jer. 8:22. Muir’s reference to “Salt rivers” alludes to Naaman’s healing baptism in the Jordan river, which feeds the Dead Sea (II Kings 5).

<sup>43</sup> In an autobiographical fragment, Muir describes his reason for leaving Indianapolis on his thousand mile walk as a decision to “take one more grand Sabbath day three years long during which I would go botanizing (fast & pray & ramble)” (*Autobiography* 3).

259–60), and Muir’s language emphasizes the universal participation in this praise. Of course, when he climbs Cathedral Peak, the name of this mountain leads him to depict himself as a church goer, “This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California. . . In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars” (*Writings* 2: 250). Muir exults that every creature in the wild actively participates in the service: “A marvelously impressive meeting in which everyone has something worth while to tell” (*Writings* 2: 251). Muir may claim that this was his first time in a Californian church, but judging from his language, he views every day in the Sierra as a Sabbath day, and not only himself but every creature as a priest in God’s temple.

These radical experiences of wild salvation led Muir to reject more explicitly organized religion and to call others to follow him into the Sierra. Here, free from human authorities and creeds, redeeming love would unify humans with each other and the rest of creation in an egalitarian, primitive “mountainanity” (*JMP* 34: 2131).<sup>44</sup> Like the Transcendentalists, Muir rejected organized religion because he felt it to be needlessly restrictive, but, also like Emerson and Thoreau, he continued to rely on biblical language and theology to articulate his mystical experiences. Thoreau expressed his shift toward a more liberal, inclusive natural religion most fully in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and in the back of one of his copies of this book, Muir wrote several pages of notes. As in most of the books he owned, Muir made an index to passages he found interesting, noting many of Thoreau’s passages about religion, particularly in the

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<sup>44</sup> As the following paragraphs make clear, I think Donald Worster’s thesis that Muir was part of the broader liberal movement of the nineteenth century is compelling (*Passion* 7–8), but I also think it is important to note how his particular Christian background shaped his distinctive place within this movement.

“Sunday” chapter.<sup>45</sup> For instance, he copied down Thoreau’s desire to “learn the impartial and unbribable beneficence of Nature” (1868, 307) and listed several other page numbers where Thoreau develops his ideas about natural religion. Muir, however, seems to think Thoreau’s efforts to use non-Western traditions to express this inclusive religion are less useful, retorting at one point in the margin of *A Week*, “Why Henry do you fable with clumsy Greek fables & Hindoos” (1868, 78). What is most interesting about Muir’s notes, though, is that interspersed with his index to Thoreau’s passages are Muir’s own notes about glaciers and the beautiful landscapes they form. Muir may not have fully agreed with Thoreau’s approach to developing a more liberal, natural religion, but Thoreau does seem to have spurred Muir to think further about how his glacier gospel could provide a more inclusive way of knowing God.

Many of Muir’s writings from his early years in the Sierra show him working out the more universal revelation he found in these glacial-carved mountains. In one 1870 letter to his friend William Trout, Muir expresses his changing religious views: “I am sorry for the dead religion so prevalent in your town but in striving to make people see religious truth as you see it remember that all have equal accountability and may well enjoy their own opinions however much they may differ from your own. I have to confess that I am more liberal than ever and less likely to agree with you on these points than when with you” (“Letter to William Trout” 28 May 1870). Muir’s comment to Trout indicates the way that he was beginning to extend the Disciples’ doctrine of inclusive egalitarianism much further than orthodox members of the group would like.

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<sup>45</sup> This volume, as well as many others from Muir’s personal library, is in the Holt-Atherton Special Collections at the University of the Pacific.

And in an unpublished fragment that was likely written the following year, the character of Muir's "more liberal" views becomes clearer:

[I]n the narrow highwalled realm of civilization . . . it is boasted forth as a grand consummation of "universal charity" that now all of the human race, black, brown, and yellow are as brethren capable of Christianity and admissible to the high heaven of Anglosaxons, but the boundary of the vertical animals once reached, every idiot and black and tan cannibals with difficulty gathered in, there is then once and forever "Positively no admittance."

Not content with closing the doors of the celestial country against animals, they are too often denied the commonest right of life on earth. Yet bears are made of the same dust as we, and breathe the same winds, and drink the same waters; and their days are warmed by the same sun, and their homes are overdomed by the same blue sky, and their life flows in heart pulsings like ours, and was poured from the same fountain; and whether they at last rise to our stingy heaven matters not, for they are blessed with terrestrial immortality. (*JMP* 34: 2018)

As on his walk to the Gulf, Muir employs a Miltonic monism to argue for kinship between all creatures, and he continues to define his more universal, more egalitarian, and more redemptive religion as a development of and improvement on traditional Christianity.

The key tenet in Muir's religion is that God's love extends to all. In a letter to his friend Catharine Merrill in 1871 about her imminent departure from a Christian school, Muir described the school as "a den of ecclesiastical slave-drivers," and as he contemplated her enslavement, he thanked "God for this tranquil freedom, this glorious mountain Yosemite barbarism" (*Writings* 9: 288, 289). The form of religion Muir reacted against attempted to control and limit the revelation of God, and as Muir wrote to Merrill later, the God he found in the Sierra poured himself out freely to all:

I wish you could come here and rest a year in the simple unmingled Love fountains of God. You would then return to your scholars with fresh truth gathered and absorbed from pines and waters and deep singing winds, and you would find that they all sang of fountain Love just as did Jesus Christ

and all of pure God manifest in whatever form. . . . God does not appear, and flow out, only from narrow chinks and round bored wells here and there in favored races and places, but He flows in grand undivided currents, shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountainizing all. (*Writings* 9: 332–33)

This is the egalitarian revelation and baptism that Muir found in the Sierra, and it confirmed his Campbellite tendency to reject creeds and dogmatic human traditions. But Muir clearly went beyond Disciples' doctrine when he claimed that "Christianity and mountainity are streams from the same fountain" (*Writings* 9: 378), and instead of any humanly governed religion, Muir worshiped in the wild, where God was freely and equally present to everyone.

While in theory this would mean that Muir believed God could be worshiped anywhere, he also followed Campbell, and the broader Reformed tradition in America, in arguing that God's presence was clearer in primitive places untainted by human corruption (Stoll, "Milton in Yosemite" 238–40). As we have seen, Muir figured the Sierra as a freshly created Eden, and so he claimed that it provided the most original revelation of the Creator. He defends this scientifically when he explains that higher elevations contain clearer glacial writing: "Glacial history upon the summit of the Sierra page is clear; the farther we descend, the more its inscriptions are crossed and recrossed . . . until only the laborious student can decipher even the most emphasized passages of the original manuscript" ("Studies in the Sierra: No. IV" 177–78). Using a similar metaphor, and beginning to shift from science to religion, Muir wrote in a Sierra journal, "God's glory is over all his works, written upon every field and sky, but here it is in larger letters—magnificent capitals" (*John of the Mountains* 47). Muir emphasizes his religious preference for the freshly created high country by claiming that the devil's "tracks are



seldom seen above the timber-line” (*Writings* 2: 150). So while God is present everywhere, even among the “lowland care and dust and din, where Nature is covered and her voice smothered” (*Writings* 2: 186), he communicates his redeeming love most powerfully in the primitive, newly-created mountains.

Muir’s egalitarian, primitive gospel unites all who choose to participate in the worship of the loving Creator, and he preached this gospel of glaciers for the rest of his life.<sup>46</sup> The Disciples’ desire to unify all Christians around a restored, apostolic worship had bogged down in doctrinal controversy; his father wrote to John in 1878, “I believe in non-sectarianism” at the end of a letter in which he states his own theological creed quite forcefully (9 Apr. 1878). Muir turned to a more egalitarian and more primitive revelation—the Book of Nature—in the hope that his wild baptism could unify where the Disciples’ water baptism had failed. Muir explains both the free, open foundation for his worship and its unifying effects in an 1870 letter to his brother David. David apparently wrote to him about the disagreement in the Disciples church over whether communion should be closed—available only to those who have been properly baptized—or open. Muir responded vehemently, “I do not like the doctrine of close communion as held by hard-shells, because the whole clumsy structure of the thing rests upon a foundation of coarse-grained dogmatism. Imperious, bolt-upright exclusiveness upon any subject is hateful, but it becomes absolutely hideous and impious in matters of religion, where all men are equally interested” (*Writings* 9: 217). This antipathy for narrow dogma is typical

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<sup>46</sup> While my focus is on Muir’s early years in the Sierra, the missionary Samuel Young, who traveled with Muir on several of his Alaska explorations, described him as a “man of God” because Muir “interpreted God to me,—the lesson of . . . those terrible, relentless, cold glaciers that he made warm with the love of God” (1). Muir describes the liberal, natural religion he shared with the Indians in Alaska in his *Travels in Alaska* (*Writings* 3: 167–68, 208).

of the Disciples, for even while Alexander Campbell preferred immersion baptism, he did not think that disputes over this should divide the church or keep people from the Lord's Supper.<sup>47</sup> In this letter Muir concurs with Campbell, telling his brother that he thinks infant baptism is "a beautiful and impressive ordinance" and that Christians who practice this method of baptism should not be excluded from the church. The conclusion of Muir's letter, however, goes beyond Campbell's openness as Muir turns to his wild baptism for its ability to unify across denominational lines:

I was baptized three times this morning. 1<sup>st</sup> (according to the old way of dividing the sermon), in balmy sunshine that penetrated to my very soul, warming all the faculties of spirit, as well as the joints and marrow of the body; 2d, in the mysterious rays of beauty that emanate from plant corollas; and 3d, in the spray of the lower Yosemite Falls. My 1<sup>st</sup> baptism was by immersion, the 2d by pouring, and the 3d by sprinkling. Consequently all Baptists are my brethering, and all will allow that I've "got religion." (*Writings* 9: 218)

The religion Muir gets through his wild baptism is open to all and, he believed, acceptable to all Christians. By immersing themselves in the clear revelation and powerful presence of God in the Sierra wilds, humans can overcome sectarian divisions and be united in the worship of their Creator.

Because Muir received his baptism in the Sierra, he repeatedly urged others to come and partake in this powerful sacrament. The more convinced he became of the good news of glaciers, the more passionate he became in proclaiming this gospel. As he wrote to one of his friends, "Come next year, all of you. Come to these purest of terrestrial fountains. Come and receive baptism and absolution from civilized sins. You were but sprinkled last year. Come and be immersed" (*Writings* 9: 367). Muir sounded a

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<sup>47</sup> Joseph Belcastro traces the history of open membership, which is directly related to open communion, from Alexander Campbell through the controversies that arose after his death (22–38).

similar note in a letter to Emerson: “Come to your mountain fountains. . . . You cannot be content with last years baptism ‘twas only a sprinkle, come be immersed. . . . You will lose no time, nothing but civilized sins, think of the soul lavings and bathings you will get” (“Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson” 18 Mar. 1872). And as he wrote to Carr about the need to let him know when she would visit, “I am in the habit of asking so many to *come, come, come* to the mountain baptisms that there is danger of having others on my hands when you come” (*Kindred* 168). Muir’s prophetic call to baptism led him often to compare himself to the biblical baptizer: “like John the Baptist, I dwell in the wilderness and have a leathern girdle about my loins and I wear sackcloth when I camp out I have ashes on my head and on my whole body” (“Letter to Emily Pelton” 15 May 1870). Like John the Baptist, Muir believed he had good news, the “gospel of glaciers,” to share with anyone who would listen (*JMP* 34: 2131).<sup>48</sup>

In the letter quoted above, after he tells Carr that he is asking “so many to *come, come, come,*” Muir requests Carr’s opinion about an article he put together for publication, “Twenty Hill Hollow.” Later that year, it appeared in the *Overland Monthly*, and while the article mainly discusses the history, composition, flora, fauna, and weather of this particular place, near the end Muir’s tone shifts and he preaches mountain baptism to his readers. Tellingly, Muir couches his baptismal appeal in terms of its egalitarian, primitive, and unifying power, and he promises spiritual redemption for those who submit to this natural baptism. The shift in Muir’s article from description to preaching is

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<sup>48</sup> Later, Muir explicitly figures the National Parks as places of baptism. As he instructs his readers at the end of his chapter on Yellowstone, “The alpenglow is fading into earthy, murky gloom, but do not let your town habits draw you away to the hotel. Stay on this good fire-mountain and spend the night among the stars. Watch their glorious bloom until the dawn, and get one more baptism of light. Then, with fresh heart, go down to your work” (*Writings* 6: 83).

marked by a shift from third to second person.<sup>49</sup> This abrupt turn brings his readers into his essay as he tells them that Twenty Hill Hollow has something for each of them:

If you wish to see how much of light, life, and joy can be got into a January, go to this blessed Hollow. If you wish to see a plant-resurrection—myriads of bright flowers crowding from the ground, like souls to a judgment—go to Twenty Hills in February. If you are traveling for health, play truant to doctors and friends, fill your pocket with biscuits, and hide in the hills of the Hollow, lave in its waters, tan in its golds, bask in its flower-shine, and your baptisms will make you a new creature indeed. Or, choked in the sediments of society, so tired of the world, here will your hard doubts disappear, your carnal incrustations melt off, and your soul breathe deep and free in God's shoreless atmosphere of beauty and love. ("Twenty Hill" 85–86).

Muir's thrice repeated "If you" implicitly claims that no matter who you are, this hollow has the power to redeem you. And he further emphasizes the egalitarian nature of this baptism in the personal testimony he provides directly after this invitation to his readers: "Never shall I forget my baptism in this font. It happened in January: a resurrection-day for many a plant and for me" ("Twenty Hill" 86). Muir links his own resurrection with that of the plants, suggesting that not only is this baptism for all humans, but also for other living things. Earlier in his article, he even extends this redemption to inanimate matter: "The net-work of dry water-courses, spread over valleys and hollows, suddenly gush with bright waters, sparkling and pouring in inlets and pools, like dusty mummies resouled and set living and laughing with color and blood" ("Twenty Hill" 84). The water that resouls the dry creek beds and the water and light that resurrect the plants are the same water and light that redeem humans from "carnal incrustations" and make them

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Austin also notes the significance of the shift in person at the end of this article: "He was not just interpreting. His aim was conversion. He wished to lead men and women to a natural environment they might appreciate without fear and then immerse them in it so they might emerge new creatures" (48).

new creatures indeed. This divine redemption comes through wild means and applies equally to all created things.

Muir locates the redemptive power of this egalitarian baptism in the most primitive, original power imaginable, the spirit that created the world. In Muir's description of his baptism, he states, "Light, of unspeakable richness, was brooding the flowers" ("Twenty Hill" 86). The verb Muir chooses to depict the action of the light, which is the word he uses elsewhere to describe the glaciers' action, is the same verb Milton uses in *Paradise Lost* to depict the Holy Spirit's action at the moment of creation: "Thou O Spirit . . . / Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad'st it pregnant" (1.17, 21–22). In the next paragraph, Muir reinforces this allusion to the Holy Spirit, the member of the Trinity who imparts the gift of grace through the sacraments, as he again switches to second person and tells his readers, "You bathe in these spirit-beams" ("Twenty Hill" 86). If readers submit to the baptism to which Muir calls them, he promises they will be made new by the very Spirit who made the earth originally and who oversees its continual re-creation.

This universally available redemption unifies all creatures who participate in it. Muir reinforces this at the conclusion of his essay when, after recounting his own baptismal experience, he claims all "wild people" will have a similar response to this hollow. When he then switches to second person, he figures all his readers as "wild people" who are unified in the common baptism that Muir gives to them: "You can not feel yourself out-of-doors; plain, sky, and mountains ray beauty which you feel. You bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the

landscape, and become part and parcel of Nature” (“Twenty Hill” 86). Muir here cites Emerson’s famous passage in “Nature” where Emerson claims “my head bathed by the blithe air . . . I am part or particle of God,” and although ostensibly “all mean egotism vanishes” in this moment, Emerson’s description is littered with first-person pronouns (*CW* 1: 10).<sup>50</sup> By shifting to the second person, Muir rhetorically transforms this private baptism into a communal redemption in which his readers participate vicariously along with him and the rest of the creatures in Twenty Hill Hollow.

Muir’s use of baptism as the controlling metaphor demonstrates the spiritual redemption effected by this unifying experience, and he reinforces the spiritual dimension by claiming this baptism will remove “doubts” and “carnal incrustations.” These “civilized sins” (*JMP* 2: 1203)—from the arrogance Muir decried in *Thousand-Mile Walk* to the “timid ignorance and unbelief” that afflict other people (*Writings* 2: 153)—separate humans from God’s redeeming love, but Muir claims that immersing oneself in creation’s cyclical renewals will make one a “new creature indeed.” This last phrase echoes Paul’s promise that “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature,” a promise Paul predicates on Christ’s death and resurrection (II Cor. 5.17). In another published description of this experience, Muir uses similar Christian language to describe the redemption he and his companion experienced: “We emerged from this ether baptism new creatures, born again; and truly not until this time were we fairly conscious that we were born at all” (*Rambles* 18). Muir found that by immersing himself in Twenty Hill Hollow with its annual deaths and resurrections, he experienced the redemption Christians find in baptism where they participate in the death and resurrection of the Creator. And as he wrote in his journal

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<sup>50</sup> Muir is probably quoting Emerson exactly, but it depends on which edition he was referencing as this section appeared in several different variants (*Collected* 1: 288).

about the natural baptism he received in a Twenty Hill Hollow rainstorm, this redemption is effective across all species and denominational divides:

This cloud waterfall, like those of Yosemite rocks, was neither spray, rain, or solid water. How glorious a baptism did our flowers receive, and how sweet their breath.

This flower baptism is the kind that should be administered to the exact measurers of all sects, for to any decent common conscience it would be at once immersion, pouring, or heavy sprinkling. (*JMP* 23: 186)

As in his letter to his brother, Muir describes his natural baptism as one that exceeds any sectarian standard; it redeems and unites everyone. This is the baptism Muir experienced and the one he proclaimed with passion.

About five years later, in a letter published in the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, Muir employs similar rhetoric in calling readers to come to Salt Lake, Nevada. In this piece, though, he first addresses readers directly and then provides background on the lake and his personal testimony to its effective baptism. By following this structure, Muir's letter vicariously baptizes readers in the very first sentence:

When the north wind blows, bathing in Salt Lake is a glorious baptism, for then it is all wildly awake with waves, blooming like a prairie in snowy crystal foam. Plunging confidently into the midst of the grand uproar you are hugged and welcomed, and swim without effort, rocking and heaving up and down, in delightful rhythm, while the winds sing in chorus and the cool, fragrant brine searches every fiber of your body; and at length you are tossed ashore with a glad Godspeed, braced and salted and clean as a saint. (*Writings* 8: 121)

After he has sainted his readers by plunging them into the water, Muir steps back and describes his experience in this unique place. He claims that, just as he immersed his readers without asking their permission, so he got his baptism in the lake without intending to. While he was there, the wind and waves were too high for him to swim safely, and yet somehow, “[w]ithout any definite determination I found myself undressed,

as if some one else had taken me in hand; and while one of the largest waves was ringing out its message and spending itself on the beach, I ran out with open arms to the next . . . and got myself into right lusty relationship with the brave old lake” (*Writings* 8: 123). Similarly to his baptism in Yosemite Falls, Muir’s self-surrender leads him into a joyous dance with the wind-tossed waves, and when he was “heaved ashore among the sunny grasses and flowers, I found myself a new creature indeed” (*Writings* 8: 124). Again, Muir borrows and intensifies Paul’s phrase to indicate that wild baptism is even more redemptive than typical Christian baptism. And he uses his own experience of transformation to urge others to come and be immersed in the beauty of Salt Lake.

Muir’s use of the second person to confer these baptizing experiences directly onto his readers illustrates one of the problems he dealt with in formulating his natural religion.<sup>51</sup> Muir originally thought that if people would expose themselves to the wilderness, they would, like him, be redeemed by the “Godful influence” of its beauty (*Writings* 2: 41). Yet the summer he spent with the shepherd Billy called into question the universal efficacy of wild beauty. For while Muir “pressed Yosemite upon him like a missionary offering the gospel,” Billy saw nothing spectacular or divine in its rocks. “Such souls,” Muir concluded, “are asleep, or smothered and befogged beneath mean pleasures or cares” (*Writings* 2: 147). Muir continued to believe that anyone who had “eyes undimmed with care” could see God’s redeeming love in the wild, but he also realized that some people were blinded by the greed and business of civilization—“blind

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<sup>51</sup> Muir’s extensive use of the second person has been generally overlooked, although Christine Oravec demonstrates that Muir’s rhetoric, partially through his direct addresses to readers, “unified the aesthetic, rational, and ethical response to nature” (258). While this is true, she overlooks the way Muir’s rhetoric, perhaps drawing on and shifting the accusatory language of some sermon styles, also describes religious responses to nature and imputes these vicariously to the reader.



with gold-dust” or “with wool over their eyes” (*Writings* 4: 161). So to reach those who did not yet have “eyes to see”—who, in Campbell’s terms were outside the “*understanding distance*”—Muir often addressed them in the second person, as the previous examples illustrate (*Writings* 5: 68).<sup>52</sup> Muir employed this rhetorical strategy to immerse his readers in God’s wildness and so enable them to vicariously experience the effects of mountain baptism: unity with all ones’ “fellow mortals” and spiritual redemption.<sup>53</sup>

Muir can baptize his readers in essays like “Twenty Hill Hollow” and “Salt Lake” because he typically addresses them as elect, capable perceivers of wilderness—even when his audience was Eastern city-dwellers, sitting in their armchairs. By figuring his readers as members of his own inner circle, Muir ensures that they will not be apathetic or blind to nature’s beauty but will respond appropriately, and he also creates a community of unified readers who share his experience of nature. In “The Passes” chapter in *Mountains of California*, for instance, Muir contrasts the “skilled” and “free mountaineer” with the “timid traveler, fresh from the sedimentary levels of the low lands” (*Writings* 4: 90). The latter will see mountain passes as “cold, dead, gloomy gashes in the bones of the mountains,” but good mountaineers will see the spiritual significance of these passes that are “telling examples of Nature’s love” (*Writings* 4: 91). As Muir explains with a reference to Psalm 91, “[mountain passes] lead through regions that lie far above the ordinary haunts of the devil, and of the pestilence that walks in

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<sup>52</sup> Muir draws on the biblical prophets for his language about people who do not respond to the beauty of the mountains because they do not have “eyes to see”; see, for example, Ezekiel 12.2, Isaiah 29.10, and Matthew 13.10-17.

<sup>53</sup> Muir employs the second person in several other essays also (*Writings* 4: 51–52, 4: 130–31, 4: 142).

darkness” (*Writings* 4: 91). And as the Psalmist employs the second person to assure his readers that “A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it [the pestilence] shall not come nigh thee” (Ps. 91.7), so Muir slips into the second person to reassure his readers that they will be safe in these passes: “They will kill care, save you from deadly apathy, set you free, and call forth every faculty into vigorous, enthusiastic action. Even the sick should try these so-called dangerous passes, because for every unfortunate they kill, they cure a thousand” (*Writings* 4: 91). Muir figures these mountain passes as more universally redemptive even than the “secret place of the most High” described in Psalm 91, for while the reader in the psalm is saved alone while thousands die around him, Muir’s reader is joined with the thousand others who are cured by the passes while only one dies. In order to guarantee his readers that they will be among those cured, Muir addresses them not as “timid traveler[s]” but as “free mountaineer[s]” who, like Muir, see and experience nature properly.

To ensure each of his readers will have “eyes to see” and be redeemed, Muir at times becomes quite direct with his readers, attributing to them his own personal experiences of nature’s redeeming love. In one of his earliest essays, “Hetch-Hetchy Valley,” Muir tells his readers, “Imagine yourself in Hetch-Hetchy. It is a bright day in June; the air is drowsy with flies” (“Hetch-Hetchy” 46).<sup>54</sup> After establishing the general setting, Muir guides his readers’ eyes around the valley—“Looking northward . . . you behold”—then to the waterfall—“Now observe”—and then to a particular point of the falls—“Near the top, where the water is more dense, you see groups of comet-like forms shooting outward” (“Hetch-Hetchy” 46). Muir’s prose focuses his readers’ gaze and

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<sup>54</sup> Muir included revised versions of this passage, all still in second person, in several later essays (“Tuolumne” 486; *Writings* 5: 280; “Features” 689–98).

helps them to see the valley in an orderly, precise way. After enabling them to see the valley from this particular vantage point, Muir takes his readers on a walk up the river: “Suppose that you are so fortunate as to be in Hetch-Hetchy during June days, and that you seek the acquaintance of these five falls. You rise and start in the early morning.” Throughout the following exploration, Muir attributes enthusiastic action to his readers: “You rush”; “you shout, ‘I see it!’”; “you discover . . . and sing”; “you are next excited”; “you dash”; “you find” (“Hetch-Hetchy” 48). As these verbs demonstrate, Muir was so determined that his readers would not be timid, apathetic tourists that he forcibly imagines them as perceptive, ecstatic participants with him in nature’s wild beauty.

Muir’s distinctive use of the second person enables his readers to participate directly and personally in nature’s redeeming love. In another essay in which Muir tells his readers to imagine themselves in a particular place and then takes them on a walking tour, he dictates to them not only physical and emotional sensations, but also spiritual ones. Like “Twenty Hill Hollow” and “Salt Lake,” readers of this essay find themselves forcibly unified with nature and so experience its love:

With inexpressible delight you wade out into the grassy sun-lake, feeling yourself contained in one of Nature’s most sacred chambers, . . . secure from yourself, free in the universal beauty. And notwithstanding the scene is so impressively spiritual, and you seem dissolved in it, yet everything about you is beating with warm, terrestrial, human love and life delightfully substantial and familiar. (*Writings* 4: 146–47)

By imputing this spiritual response to his readers, Muir vicariously imparts an individual experience with nature to each of his readers. While this rhetorical strategy implicitly undercuts Muir’s confidence in individuals’ ability to interpret nature on their own, it also demonstrates his belief that every person must participate in God’s wildness for themselves. If some could not do this either because of their physical location or because

of their spiritual blindness, Muir's prose would provide them a surrogate immersion in nature. Muir was confident that if people could just see nature directly they would grasp God's love; as he wrote in his fragment on mountainanity, "The action of nature on free and healthy minds is alike and constant and is independent of moods and preeducation. The expressions of God in Nature cannot mean love to one hate to another" (*JMP* 34: 2131). So, faced with apathetic tourists and the "asleep" and "befogged" Billy, Muir felt he must use his writings to give readers a personal experience of the wild beauty and so unify them with nature and with each other. Like Alexander Campbell, who had to instruct his followers how to read the Bible even while claiming everyone could read it on their own, Muir had to teach his readers the proper interpretation of nature even while claiming its text was clear to everyone. But he remained convinced that with a little guidance, the redemptive love expressed in "God's wildness" could save people from their "civilized sins" and unite them in primitive, unfallen worship.

### *Preserving Wild Places in the Garden of Eden*

As the Gilded Age rapaciously cut into Western wilderness, however, Muir realized his mountainanity had a second problem to overcome: human destruction of its temples. Muir had recognized earlier the damage that "the erratic genus Homo" could wreck in God's divinely ordered wilderness (*Writings* 1: 359). As he wrote while herding sheep in the Sierra, "as far as I have seen, man alone, and the animals he tames, destroy these gardens" (*Writings* 1: 95). Early in his career, Muir looked for divine intervention, either via a "transmundane furnace" or, in a reference to the Garden of Eden, "a wall of fire to fence such gardens" (*Writings* 1: 359; 2: 95). But as he matured, Muir came to realize that instead of being burned up or kicked out of creation, humans

could participate in God's wildness. This shift demonstrates how Muir's understanding of "Creation's plan" developed to include an integral role for humans. So unlike his earlier call for a wall of fire to keep people out of Eden, Muir's later writings in defense of Hetch Hetchy figured all of America as a place whose Edenic purity could be preserved and experienced if people would resist the temptation to violate the National Parks. By comparing these parks to the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, Muir portrayed these wild places as reminders for humans to submit to God's authority and, rather than order nature for their uses, seek to understand and participate in God's redemptive, wild order in all of America.

In one of his first essays on forest conservation, "God's First Temples: How Shall We Preserve Our Forests?," Muir grounds his preservation efforts on God's ownership of the forests. They could not have been made exclusively for humans because "[m]an himself will as surely become extinct as sequoia or mastodon, and be at length known only as a fossil" ("God's First Temples" 631). Arrogant human use, then, ignores God's larger plan for his creation. In the final essay of *Our National Parks*, "The American Forests," an essay heavily influenced by Thoreau's writings,<sup>55</sup> Muir attempts to narrate this divine plan with a mythic history of America: "The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best He ever planted" (*Writings* 6: 357). Muir describes God's "infinite loving deliberation and forethought" as he oversaw the creation of the American landscape. This divine creation

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<sup>55</sup> Muir read Thoreau fairly early in his literary career—he remarks on reading *Maine Woods* in a letter to Carr in 1870 (*Kindred* 111)—but sometime in the early 1900s he commissioned Gleason to secure for him the complete, twenty-volume set of Thoreau's works (Gleason 18 Dec. 1907). Every single volume in Muir's copy of this set has extensive notes in the back, so Muir apparently re-read Thoreau quite carefully.

justifies Muir's portrayal of America as an Eden where "[e]verywhere, everywhere over all the blessed continent, there was beauty and melody and kindly, wholesome, foodful abundance" (*Writings* 6: 357–58). Indeed, the American forests seemed like an eternal paradise where humans and animals and plants dwelled harmoniously: "immortal, immeasurable, enough and to spare for every feeding, sheltering beast and bird, insect and son of Adam." This Eden fell, however, when "the steel axe of the white man rang out" (*Writings* 6: 361). It is not the entrance of humans that caused this fall—the Indians lived here peacefully for centuries—and it is not even the introduction of agriculture, according to Muir. Rather, it is shortsighted settlers, who "in the blindness of hunger, . . . claiming Heaven as their guide, regarded God's trees as only a larger kind of pernicious weeds" (*Writings* 6: 362). Muir cites Thoreau's observation, in *The Maine Woods*, "that soon the country would be so bald that every man would have to grow whiskers to hide its nakedness" (*Writings* 6: 384). In his copies of *The Maine Woods*, Muir marked Thoreau's condemnation of the arrogance with which loggers used trees with no regard for their higher ends, and like Thoreau, Muir now pleads for the protection of the "remnant" of God's best forest gardens (*Writings* 6: 363).

Muir's religious history justifies forest preservation as a religious duty, and Muir further argues that God's forests provide irreplaceable economic and religious resources for humans. Muir spends much of his article discussing the practicalities of forest management, but near the end he reminds his readers why this issue is urgently important: "every summer thousands of acres of priceless forests, with their underbrush, soil, springs, climate, scenery, and religion, are vanishing away in clouds of smoke" (*Writings* 6: 392). Because of these ecological, economic, and spiritual losses, Muir

urges Americans and the federal government to join God in his creative work: “Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ’s time—and long before that—God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools,—only Uncle Sam can do that” (*Writings* 6: 393).<sup>56</sup> With this final appeal Muir ends his book, and while his essay has stressed the practical benefits of forest preservation, Muir’s narrative opening and religious conclusion indicate these benefits are secondary to the religious responsibility humans have to participate in protecting God’s wilderness.

Muir’s blend of religious and practical justifications for forest preservation signals the way his thinking extends beyond the dualistic rhetoric that declares the wild to be good and civilization to be bad. Because of the Hetch Hetchy controversy and Muir’s firm preservationist stance, Muir’s anti-utilitarian approach to wilderness management has been emphasized, but as Worster notes about Muir’s earlier writings,

Muir had found the balanced tone and the pragmatic argument that would mark his conservation philosophy for years to come. He was calling for a more enlightened utilitarianism. Use should not mean destruction. Use should be wise, humane, and broad in concept. Use should include more than material consumption. The highest use of the Sierra was to feed men’s spirits and satisfy their hunger for beauty. (*Passion* 315)

Like Thoreau, Muir’s ecological ethics do not require humans to stop all use of other creatures, but to shape their use around the recognition that each “creature . . . the Lord has taken pains to make is . . . essential to the completeness of . . . the cosmos” (*Writings* 1: 356–57). While his rhetoric sometimes reinforces the binaries that have haunted

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<sup>56</sup> In a revision of this passage, Muir changes the last phrase to “this is left to the American people” (“Save” 4); this version seems to reflect his egalitarian attitude toward politics more accurately.

American attitudes toward nature, he usually transcended such thinking and articulated practical ways for humans to participate in God's ends.

Muir's particular religious motivation for establishing National Parks also expressed itself in the specific policies he advocated. These policies reflected the egalitarian, primitive basis of Muir's natural religion. For while Muir valued wilderness inherently as God's untainted creation, he did not think wild places should be set apart from humans. Rather, he saw the National Park system as a way to preserve wilderness places throughout the country so all people could easily access them and experience the wild redemption they offered. Muir indicates this human purpose for setting aside tracts of wilderness in the opening sentences of *Our National Parks*, "The tendency nowadays to wander in wildernesses is delightful to see. Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life" (*Writings* 6: 3). Muir wanted these fountains of life to be "accessible and available to tourists" (*Writings* 6: 15), so he encouraged extending railroad lines to parks (Worster, *Passion* 376, 408). As he tells readers about one easily accessible forest reservation, Bitter Root, "Get off the track at Belton Station, and in a few minutes you will find yourself in the midst of what you are sure to say is the best care-killing scenery on the continent" (*Writings* 6: 21). Muir wanted the "care-killing" beauty of the Parks to be accessible to all people because of his egalitarian, inclusive religious beliefs. Keeping people out of the wilderness would be as wrong as keeping people from baptism or the Lord's Supper, so Muir sought a National Park system that would be open to all.



This openness might taint the Parks' status as wilderness, but Muir accepted this cost while fighting strenuously against any economic or political meddling that would dilute the purity of these temples. The most famous of these fights, of course, was over the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley, and the rhetoric Muir used to combat this dam demonstrated his commitment to preserving the Parks' primitive, divinely-created beauty. Following Disciples theology, Muir saw the Parks' primitive purity as the source of their sacramental redemption. In his defense of Hetch Hetchy, Muir drew on the common trope of America as a new Eden to figure the threatened valley as parallel to Eden's forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: "The smallest forest reserve, and the first I ever heard of, was in the Garden of Eden; and though its boundaries were drawn by the Lord, and embraced only one tree, yet even so moderate a reserve as this was attacked" ("The National Parks" 276). This image of Hetch Hetchy as a sanctified place within a Garden of Eden became a recurring image in Muir's other articles written to defend the valley from desecration ("Tuolumne" 488; *Writings* 5: 287).

By figuring this valley as the site of the forbidden tree, Muir imagines all of America as a Garden of Eden in which we live and work. Muir's Edenic America is not untainted by human activity, but it includes particular places that humans don't touch. These restricted areas, like the restriction on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden, remind humans that the Creator is the ultimate source of right and wrong, and that our human economy, which tries "to make everything dollarable," isn't the final source of value ("Tuolumne" 488). Leaving these wild places inviolate may enable humans to saunter, as Thoreau hoped, through "some up country Eden" (*Natural History* 244) in their own backyard; it would ensure that humans submit to God's order rather

than following their own economic interests. As Muir writes in an article defending Hetch Hetchy,

Garden- and park-making goes on everywhere with civilization, for everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul. This natural beauty-hunger is displayed in poor folks' window-gardens made up of a few geranium slips in broken cups, as well as in the costly lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks—the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc. (“Tuolumne” 488)

The wild order preserved in the National Parks allows humans to structure their whole lives around God's ecology, to notice the beauty of geraniums growing in broken cups. For Muir, National Parks serve as primitive, pure reminders of God's external standard of value to which humans need to align themselves as they go about their business in the rest of Eden.

Muir builds on this analogy to lend his defense of Hetch Hetchy great religious weight. For instance, he links the arguments of the dam supporters to Satan's temptation of Eve: “Their arguments are curiously like those of the devil, devised for the destruction of the first garden—so much of the very best Eden fruit going to waste; so much of the best Tuolumne water and Tuolumne scenery going to waste” (*Writings* 5: 289–90). And while those in favor of the dam argued it would “enhance” the beauty of Hetch Hetchy “by forming a crystal-clear lake,” Muir rejected this logic because it arrogantly assumed that humans could improve on God's primitive creation: “Landscape gardens, places of recreation and worship, are never made beautiful by destroying and burying them” (*Writings* 5: 290). Muir's insistence that sections of God's original creation should not be tampered with undergirds his famous exclamation: “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been

consecrated by the heart of man” (*Writings* 5: 291). This rhetoric surely influenced the Secretary of the Interior, whose rejection of an early application for the Hetch Hetchy dam Muir quotes: “the Congress of the United States sought by law to preserve [Yosemite National Park] for all coming time as nearly as practicable in the condition fashioned by the hand of the Creator” (“Tuolumne” 488; *Writings* 5: 287). National Parks need to preserve God’s creation in its primitive state so humans could have access to wild, sacramental redemption.

Muir’s passionate writing and preservation efforts, therefore, should be seen as the logical outcomes of his belief that direct, individual participation in wild nature could sacramentally redeem and unite humans with God and all of his creation. By connecting his appeals for forest preservation to “the universal battle between right and wrong,” Muir gave his ecological ethics the utmost moral significance (“Tuolumne” 488). As Muir’s contemporary, William James, points out, an ethic—such as anthropocentrism or biocentrism—based only on the demands of finite subjects cannot inspire the “moral energy” of an ethic founded on God (*Pragmatism* 261). By sacramentally linking wild nature with a loving God, Muir took the battle for National Parks from “the compass of a couple of poor octaves” to “the infinite scale of values” (James, *Pragmatism* 261). Muir’s theocentric view of nature not only avoids the ambiguities of a biocentric ethic (Dooley, “Ambiguity” 55)—which has no way of mediating between the rights of bears and alligators and humans—but it also offers a more binding moral obligation. So while Muir lost the battle to save Hetch Hetchy, the religious importance he lent to the National Parks proved remarkably successful in preserving and expanding them over the next hundred years.

As Dorman notes, this success should prompt us to examine Muir's religious rhetoric in order to understand why it was so effective (220–21).<sup>57</sup> Muir's mountainanity led to a dual motivation for preserving tracts of wilderness: first because God's ongoing creation was good and inherently glorified him, and second because the loving way that God continually brought forth life and beauty from death and destruction could redeem people who joined this wild order. For Muir, the cultural benefits of wilderness obtain only because of the divine, intrinsic worth of wilderness. So while Muir could fight for government preservation for pragmatic reasons—leaving wilderness alone benefited Americans economically, culturally, and religiously—the real reason he believed wilderness could benefit humans was because he also believed it was divinely ordered for its own good. These two strands cannot be separated in Muir's thought without distorting the religious system of value that inspired his imagination. Muir valued the wilderness because it embodies an economy of divine love where destruction was always transformed into creation and death was always redeemed into greater beauty. He hoped that by reading and experiencing this glacial gospel, humans could likewise be redeemed from their “carnal incrustations” and could learn to order their own economies on this same love.

In many ways, Muir's valuation of “God's wildness” participates in the nineteenth-century tradition that saw primitive American nature as God's special revelation to his people. While this view, derived in part from the Puritan understanding of their role in divine history, rejects the notion that the wilderness is “the *Devil's*

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<sup>57</sup> Fox also draws attention to Muir's successful religious rhetoric, but he construes it not as representative of Muir's actual beliefs, but as a way to appeal to his “Christian readers” (118). I, however, argue that Muir's imagination was too deeply formed by these categories to see his Christian references as only a calculated appeal to certain readers.

territories” that must be ploughed and ordered by the American church, its weakness is that it offers little guidance regarding how humans should actually conduct their lives. Not everyone can run off to go hiking in the Sierra backcountry. Muir’s readers, then, should certainly question whether his high valuation of wild nature helped perpetuate an unhelpful distinction between Nature and Culture, Wilderness and Civilization. But as Buell argues, Muir’s emphasis on divine wilderness can “complement” efforts to protect and value what ecocritics like Scott Hess call “everyday nature” (Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* 13; Hess 106).<sup>58</sup> And Muir did in fact believe that God was present everywhere, “flow[ing] in grand undivided currents, shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountainizing all” (*Writings* 9: 333). By elevating the sacred status of wild nature, then, Muir hoped that humans could go to wild places to learn God’s wild system of value, to learn what God called good and evil and not to set themselves up as the arbiters of morality. Once they respect these places, humans could then go back to the rest of the American Eden and see and experience God’s redeeming love everywhere, even in places where it was dimmed by “civilized sins.” Thus he saw National Parks as inspiring people to recognize God’s wildness even in “window-gardens made up of a few geranium slips in broken cups” (“Tuolumne” 488). And as Holmes points out, Muir spent much of his own life away from pure wilderness (246–48); it was the wild baptisms he received in places like Hetch Hetchey that enabled him to experience and share God’s love wherever he was.<sup>59</sup> But Eden wouldn’t be Eden without the inviolable Tree of the Knowledge of

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<sup>58</sup> John Gatta states his agreement with Buell’s assessment (*Making Nature Sacred* 156–57).

<sup>59</sup> While Holmes points out that Muir’s biography demonstrates the falsity of the Wilderness/Civilization binary, Holmes argues Muir’s writing does enact this false dichotomy (246–47).

Good and Evil, and so Muir fought to preserve the wild places that most clearly revealed God's character. As he boldly claimed, "In God's wildness lies the hope of the world" (*John of the Mountains* 317).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Lost and Saved in a Garden”: Cather’s Marian Restoration of Ecological Community

Wherever there was a French priest, there should be a garden of fruit trees and vegetables and flowers. [Latour] often quoted to his students that passage from their fellow Auvergnat, Pascal: that Man was lost and saved in a garden.

—Cather, *DCA* 278–79

America and Eden were so strongly linked in the late nineteenth century that it was natural for John Muir to compare the National Parks to that garden’s prohibited tree, which the government could protect to maintain America’s primitive purity. In Willa Cather’s early prairie novels, published in the second decade of the twentieth century, she takes a darker view of this analogy, figuring the new nation as an already fallen Eden. For instance, in *My Ántonia* (1918) Cather compares the unscrupulous Peter Krajiek to a rattlesnake (*My Ántonia* 31), and even after Jim kills a monster snake—which seemed “like the ancient, eldest Evil” (*My Ántonia* 45–46)—the rapacious greed of men like Krajiek and Wick Cutter still leads to the deaths of Pavel and Mr. Shimerda. As Adam and Eve were tempted to do, Cutter determines good and evil according to his own desires, with destructive consequences for those around him. For Cather the untamed West is not a place of idyllic innocence; it is a postlapsarian setting which the snake has already entered and where cultures and species clash violently. Her early novels hold out a hope that creative, benevolent women like Ántonia and Alexandra may be able to give birth to a more nurturing culture, but as the horrors of World War I gave way to the crass materialism of the roaring twenties, the grounds for such hope appeared increasingly tenuous.

After her confirmation in the Episcopal Church at the end of 1922 (Woodress 337), Cather turned to the Christian tradition in search of some way to bring a more peaceful ecological order to America's Western lands. It is in the book that she considered her "best," *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Calendar 275), that Cather achieves this vision most fully. With an astonishing creativity that has not yet been adequately appreciated, Cather restores ecological harmony by transposing into the American Southwest two New Testament antitypes of the Edenic fall: the Virgin Mary's assent to Gabriel's proposal and Jesus' assent to his Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane.

These two central motifs in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) may seem unrelated, but Cather unites their models of attentive submission in the section titled "The Month of Mary." Here her two priests are in the church garden, Latour thinning carrots and Vaillant contemplating Mary, his "Gracious Patroness" (DCA 213, 211). "Mary, and the month of May" have long been connected for Vaillant; when he was a young curate in France, he wanted to hold special devotions for Mary during this month. When his superior refused, Vaillant submitted and spent the day in prayer, modeling his request on Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*Not according to my desires, but if it is for thy glory, grant me this boon, O Mary, my hope*" (DCA 212).<sup>1</sup> That night Vaillant's superior unexpectedly changed his mind and permitted Vaillant to celebrate his Marian devotions.<sup>2</sup> Sitting now in a garden in the New World, Vaillant ponders the significance

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<sup>1</sup> Murphy notes the similarities between Vaillant's prayer and Christ's prayer in Gethsemane (DCA 471).

<sup>2</sup> Cather borrows this story quite directly from her main historical source for her book, William Howlett (33–35).



of these and other events in his life that happened during May, “the blessed month when this sinful and sullied world puts on white as if to commemorate the Annunciation, and becomes, for a little, lovely enough to be in truth the Bride of Christ” (*DCA* 213).

Vaillant’s reflections weave together Mary, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the garden in which Latour is now working, figuring all three as restoring the sinful and sullied world to its proper order. As Latour explains later, citing Blaise Pascal, “Man was lost and saved in a garden” (*DCA* 279). The event that sullied the world and the event that restored it both occurred in a garden; the Edenic fall disordered the entire ecological community, and in her narrative Cather turns to Mary and Gethsemane to imagine how her priests might peacefully reconcile the disparate members of the American Southwest. These biblical models guide the priests as they seek to reconcile the competing cultures—French, Spanish, Mexican, Indian, and American—and the competing species—European peaches, tamarisks, and lotus flowers with the indigenous cottonwoods and verbena—that vie for space in these newly-formed ecological communities.

In her early novels, Cather develops characters, such as Ivar in *O Pioneers!* (1913), who value wild nature as God’s creation. Yet although these characters are portrayed sympathetically, they are unable to slow the relentless logic of Manifest Destiny. The most Cather hopes for is that these religious insights will be adopted by benevolent pioneers like Alexandra. After her 1922 confirmation in the Episcopal Church—a more liturgical and hierarchical church than the Baptist denomination in which she was raised—Cather, like some of the Southern Agrarians, turns to Catholicism to imagine a communal alternative to the exploitative commercialism that seemed to thrive off the individualism of some strains of Protestantism. *Death Comes for the*

*Archbishop* uses Catholic theology, then, to figure humans as humble servants in America's diverse cultural and ecological communities, servants that might participate in God's work of reconciliation by assenting with Mary to a divine call and submitting with Christ to the Father's will. This harmonious reconciliation, accomplished in the Incarnation that unites God and man, provides the model for the ecological household Cather's priests lovingly cultivate in the fallen landscape of the Southwest.

### *Cather's Catholic Vision of Community*

In *O Pioneers!*, Crazy Ivar stands as an exemplar of ecological humility whose biblically-infused wisdom teaches Alexandra how to care for her land more sustainably than her brothers and other neighbors. Yet Ivar's approach to the land seems too simplistic and remains vulnerable to economic forces: he eventually loses his homestead through "mismanagement" because he does not work it enough to prove his claim (83). Thus it is Alexandra, the wise steward of the land, whom this novel seems to ultimately uphold. As indicated by the novel's title, with its allusion to Whitman's celebratory "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," Cather attempts to portray a heroic, beneficent version of Manifest Destiny. While Alexandra may not have the militarism of Whitman's pioneers, with their "weapons ready" and their "detachments . . . [c]onquering" the frontier (174), her form of stewardship remains defined by its effectiveness in settling the land and rendering it economically profitable: like the economic blessings that indicated God's favor on the Puritan colonies, Alexandra's long-term financial success proves that her methods are better than either Ivar's or her brothers'. So while religion shapes Ivar's ecological imagination, the novel ultimately overturns shortsighted economics not with Ivar's religious vision, but with Alexandra's more sustainable economics. Only in her

later novels will Cather more fully explore how a culture might be able to judge human actions based on a religious standard of value, a standard that actually treats all creatures as God's.

*O Pioneers!* introduces Ivar as a religious settler whose lifestyle is rooted in his individual understanding of the Bible. When Alexandra and her brothers come to visit Ivar, he is memorizing Psalm 104 and tells Alexandra's brothers that they should not shoot the migratory fowl because "these wild things are God's birds. He watches over them and counts them, as we do our cattle; Christ says so in the New Testament" (43). Alexandra's brothers mock this reading of the Bible, but Ivar is not concerned with what others think; he never goes to church because "He had a peculiar religion of his own and could not get on with any of the denominations" (40). His solitary study always occurs on "his wild homestead" because "the Bible seemed truer to him" there (41). Ivar's individualistic reading of the Bible enables his neighbors to dismiss his ideas as "crazy," but he nevertheless orders his life around his peculiar religious beliefs.

Ivar lives in a cave and attempts to live like an animal, changing his land as little as possible; this mode of life appears simultaneously commendable and impractical. His dwelling blends almost entirely into the landscape: "But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (40). In fact, Ivar disrupts nature even less: the coyote who lived here before him almost certainly ate meat, but Ivar refuses to eat any flesh (46). His lifestyle is portrayed as both admirably consistent and regretfully impractical.

As the narrator remarks, “when one considered that his chief business was horse-doctoring, it seemed rather short-sighted of him to live in the most inaccessible place he could find” (38). Because Ivar does not work his land, Alexandra’s brothers expect him not to prove up his claim (47), and they turn out to be right when Ivar loses his homestead through “mismanagement” and comes to live with Alexandra (83), presumably giving way to a settler who will have no qualms about building a house or shooting birds.

Alexandra turns out to be the novel’s exemplary farmer as she learns from Ivar’s natural wisdom while implementing it in a sustainable, profitable way. Her brothers think Ivar is crazy and mock his insights, but Alexandra solicits his advice on how to keep her hogs from getting sick. He tells her that because the farmers treat pigs even worse than cows and chickens, it is no wonder that they are diseased: “I tell you, sister, the hogs of this country are put upon! They become unclean, like the hogs in the Bible” (46). Alexandra follows his council and gives her pigs more space, and because she cultivates her farm with more creativity and forethought than her neighbors, she soon becomes one of the most prosperous landowners. As in Johnson’s and Mather’s histories, economic success demonstrates her moral superiority. When Ivar comes to live with her, she continues to learn from his biblical wisdom and his understanding of animals and plants (*OP* 84).<sup>3</sup> As she tells Ivar, “I have gone to you for advice oftener than I have ever gone to any one” (89). Although she respects Ivar’s perspective, she does not practice his unobtrusive lifestyle; she builds a fine house and manages a large

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<sup>3</sup> Ivar’s continued influence on Alexandra, even after he loses his land, is why Matthew Schubnell calls Ivar the “moral center in *O Pioneers!*” (48). Schubnell argues more specifically that Cather models Ivar on the early monastic desert fathers.

agricultural operation (79–80). Alexandra claims that she does this work as a steward for the future inhabitants of the land. As she concludes at the end of the novel, “The land belongs to the future. . . We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while” (272–73). Alexandra’s form of respectful, wise use, seems to be the ethic that *O Pioneers!* tentatively embraces as practical and yet not selfishly exploitative.

Cather develops a similar ecological ethic in her two other prairie novels, but only after her confirmation in the Episcopal Church does her work explore more fully a religious vision of the human place in the natural ecology.<sup>4</sup> Patrick Dooley notes this development in Cather’s work, pointing out the shortcomings of both Ivar’s biblically-motivated preservation of wild animals and Alexandra’s form of stewardship: “biocentric preservationism has serious theoretical flaws, and homocentric conservation is vulnerable to economic pressures. Perhaps a third option, environmental theocentrism, can address some of the shortcomings of both views” (“Biocentric” 73). While Dooley rightly identifies the philosophical advantages of a theocentric ecological ethic, his brief essay does not provide a full analysis of Cather’s mature vision, although he astutely points to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as the book in which Cather most fully works out these ideas. An understanding of this narrative, however, with its focus on two Catholic priests, depends on a prior understanding of why Cather turned to Catholicism to develop her religious ecological ethic. Situating this turn within the larger crisis of authority in early twentieth-century America reveals how Cather hopes to restrain individuals from

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<sup>4</sup> There are hints of this religious perspective in her early novels. Steven Shively, for instance, examines Cather’s portrayal of Christian sacrifice in *My Ántonia* (52, 57). See also Hermione Lee, who argues Cather’s confirmation in the Episcopal Church marked a religious shift in her fiction (260).

acting only according to their own interests and instead see themselves as members of a divinely ordered family.

In many ways, Ivar stands in the American Protestant tradition of Thoreau and Muir. Like them, he is a biblical prophet whose moral authority comes from his connection to wild nature. Like them, he does not attend a regular church. Like them, he reads the Bible in his own way and finds it “truer” in the wild than in a church. Like them, many of his neighbors think he is rather odd. This is a distinctively American figure, one whose moral purity and authority to interpret the Bible is based on his (or less often her) personal connection to primitive, American Nature. Even though Thoreau and Muir develop a richer vision in their writings, their persona as men who live in the wild participates in this trope. Throughout the nineteenth century, as Perry Miller argues, America became increasingly “Nature’s Nation.” Yet as Miller also observes, by identifying America’s moral center with its wild nature,

the savage artist poses for the Christianity of the country a still more disturbing challenge, as Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman posed it: if he must, to protect his savage integrity, reject organized religion along with organized civilization, then has not American religion, or at any rate Protestantism, the awful task of reëxamining, with the severest self-criticism, the course on which it so blithely embarked a century ago . . . ? (*Errand* 216).

In *O Pioneers!* Cather responds to this disturbing challenge of the savage artist with the character of Alexandra. She cultivates American nature while remaining connected to its primitive side, so she represents a way of civilizing American nature that is not exploitative and selfish and that might preserve the moral integrity of a natural nation. Alexandra’s approach to farming follows the middle ground that Leo Marx identifies as the ideal of many American writers at this time. But as Marx demonstrates, this middle

ground remains vulnerable to the encroachment of the industrial machine, and the balance Alexandra maintains depends only on her individual perception of the pastoral ideal.<sup>5</sup> Like Miller's savage artist, Alexandra's moral authority remains dependent on her own tie to nature. This resolution may work for Alexandra, but it remains a precarious one.

Because Protestantism decenters authority from the church hierarchy and spreads it among individual believers—particularly when inflected with the dualism inherited from the Puritans—Protestant culture leaves ecological communities vulnerable to individuals who choose to define nature in ways that permit them to exploit it. For every Ivar there are ten Wick Cutters, for every Thoreau there are ten John Fields, for every Muir there are ten Billys. Cather's growing interest in Catholic theology, and particularly the Virgin Mary, indicates her participation in a broader movement that John Gatta, in *The American Madonna*, traces in American literature. Several Protestant authors turn to the communal, religious ideal of the Virgin Mary to undercut "the ideal of the solitary soul, wedded only to American nature, [which] has answered a mostly masculine desire" (*American Madonna* 139). While Cather, like the other Protestants Gatta examines (*American Madonna* 4–8), did not convert to Catholicism, her later novels draw on its Marian tradition and more hierarchical structure to develop a fuller response to the problematic figure Miller identifies as the "savage artist." Cather was not alone in recognizing this weakness in American Protestantism; three years after the publication of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the Southern Agrarians published *I'll Take My Stand*,

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<sup>5</sup> Marx in fact concludes that even the American ideal pastoral resolution becomes individualized by the early twentieth century: "an inspiring vision of a humane community has been reduced to a token of individual survival" (364).

which levels a similar critique at the Northern, Protestant industrialism that they blamed for exploiting the land and its local communities.

In the introduction to their Agrarian manifesto, the twelve Southerners argue that Americans allow the industrial economy to destroy the land because they have strayed from their religious and artistic heritage. “Religion,” they argue, “is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our rôle as creatures within it” (*I’ll Take My Stand* xlii). Because art “depends, . . . like religion, on a right attitude to nature,” they fear their culture is in danger of losing both its religion and its art. This is because industry gives people the “illusion of having power over nature”; humans are no longer “creatures within” nature but are themselves the creators of their own nature (*I’ll Take My Stand* xliii). While most of the contributors to this book were in fact Protestants, Allen Tate, in his essay, “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” declares that the only way a cohesive cultural tradition can be regained in the South would be for Southerners to reject Protestantism—“a non-agrarian and trading religion” (*I’ll Take My Stand* 168)—and return to its medieval, Catholic, European roots. Originally, Tate argues, “the South was a profoundly traditional European community” (*I’ll Take My Stand* 172).<sup>6</sup> Tate’s argument oversimplifies the distinctions between Protestant and Catholic culture—after all, the South was never exactly a bastion of Catholicism—and Tate’s essay and others in the collection are marked by bitterness and racism. So while it is unsurprising that many readers rejected the Agrarian critique of

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<sup>6</sup> Tate, of course, is not alone in associating the antebellum Southern culture with Europe and Catholicism. This was a common nostalgia in the South during the reconstruction: as Bercovitch notes, “Southern apologists after the Civil War saw themselves as regional Europeans without a country” (*Puritan Origins* 139). Mark Twain, for instance, mocked the “Sir Walter disease” he found so prevalent during his post-war travels in the South, blaming these medieval characteristics for the South’s backwardness (467–69).



American culture, the Agrarians' insights into the dangers of an industrial society have proved remarkably prophetic.

Cather's writings record a similar diagnosis of the ills of modern America, and like Allen Tate she turns to Catholicism as a potential source of religious and aesthetic authority that could stand against a culture eager to cast off any restraint in its pursuit of wealth and comfort.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have linked Cather to Southern culture and the Southern Agrarians; after all, Cather was born in Virginia and spent the first nine years of her life there. In particular, though, what unites Cather and these Agrarian intellectuals is their shared search for a religious, cultural authority that could check an exploitative industrial economy, which continued to grow unabated under the individualism of Protestantism. The Southwest seemed to be associated, in Cather's mind, with an older, Catholic civilization that did not suffer from the industrial vices of the modern age. Elizabeth Sergeant, one of Cather's friends, describes a letter Cather wrote during her 1912 visit to the Southwest, in which the landscape made her feel that "the grandiose and historical scale of things seemed to forecast some great spiritual event—something like a Crusade, perhaps; something certainly that had nothing to do with the appalling mediocrity and vulgarity of the industrial civilization" (91–92). This sense of the Southwest as an older, more Catholic place shares similarities with Tate's view of the American South. While tracing Cather's personal acquaintances and influences is difficult because so many of her letters and papers were destroyed, it is certainly intriguing that in 1926 Tate moved into 27 Bank Street, a few yards away from Cather's

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<sup>7</sup> While scholars like Guy Reynolds and Susan Hill are certainly right that anti-Catholic sentiment was on the rise in early twentieth-century America (Reynolds 7–8; Hill 99–100), Cather's turn to Catholicism takes place in a particularly Southern context, which problematizes Hill's claim that Cather turned to the Catholic Church because she saw it as marginalized.

apartment on 5 Bank Street (McDonald 124). Both knew the editor Henry Canby and were active members in New York's literary circles, so it is possible that Cather met Tate and at least knew of his work. Other members of the Southern Agrarians certainly followed Cather's work; Donald Davidson favorably reviewed *My Ántonia*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in his literary column (Nettels 170–78). Significantly, in his review of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Davidson transfers Europe's religious geography onto the American map as he praises Cather's Catholic subject: "This book gives us the west which got its racial heritage from Mexican and Indian sources and its religious heritage from the Catholic south of Europe rather than the Protestant north.(91–92)" These biographical connections are suggestive because, as Joyce McDonald observes, the views of the Southern Agrarians, particularly Tate, "often parallel Cather's in their anti-industrialism and anti-materialism, as well as in their pastoral vision, religious sensibility, and Old World viewpoint" (69). Like the Agrarians, Cather traced the rapacious industry of modern America to its loss of a shared, aesthetic vision of the good, a vision she also sought in Old World Catholic forms.

This shift in Cather's writing mirrors a similar shift in her personal life as she moved away from her Baptist upbringing and toward a more hierarchical and aesthetically ordered form of Christianity. She grew up attending a Baptist church in Virginia and read the Bible and Christian books such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Brown xv–xvi). After moving to Red Cloud at the age of nine, Cather never again attended church regularly, and her early writings in particular express a skeptical view of Christians, although her intense privacy complicates any clear understanding of her religious views. Some critics, such as Janis Stout, conclude that at least until the last few

years of her life, Cather had “an essentially secular and skeptical cast of mind, a cast of mind keenly responsive to the aesthetic experience of religion and its moral and cultural associations” (“Faith Statements” 26). E. K. Brown and John Murphy, however, argue that much of Cather’s writing evinces a more serious concern with religion, and that after her 1922 confirmation in the Episcopal Church, her books “touched more and more closely on religious issues” (Brown 228).<sup>8</sup> What is particularly significant about Cather’s religious development, in addition to her increasing engagement with religious questions, is her move from the Baptist denomination to the Episcopal Church, a more hierarchical and liturgical branch of Christianity. Brown notes this shift and speculates that Cather chose the Episcopal Church because it placed “no strain on the relation between religion and art, or on the relation between religion and civilization” (xvi). The Episcopal Church, and even more so the Catholic Church, guides individuals by its aesthetic, ordered vision of human life.

Cather’s search for a religiously ordered vision of human community begins in earnest with *The Professor’s House* (1925), where Cather indicates the key features of Christian theology that appeal to her and that will shape her later novels: the aesthetic order by which some forms of Christianity impart significance to each individual while uniting them in community. Professor St. Peter’s lecture to his students on the failure of science and industry to improve human life and the contrasting aesthetic and moral contributions of religion has been taken by many to express Cather’s own views on the subject:

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<sup>8</sup> John Murphy has been the most prolific proponent of reading Cather in a religious context. See especially his essay “Willa Cather and the Literature of Christian Mystery” and the collection of essays he edited titled *Willa Cather and the Culture of Belief*. See also Bohlke (27).

As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing. The king and the beggar had the same chance at miracles and great temptations and revelations. And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own individual lives. It makes us happy to surround our creature needs and bodily instincts with as much pomp and circumstance as possible. Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had. (*Professor's* 68–69)

The religious vision that St. Peter nostalgically recollects bears some resemblance to the Puritan understanding of their role in God's ongoing redemptive drama. But it differs from the Puritan view in a crucial way. While the original Puritans believed in a hierarchical view of human society and the created order—John Winthrop's famous sermon, "A Modell of Christian Charity," argues that charity is only possible in a fairly rigid social structure—their republican descendents reinterpreted them as the founders of American democracy.<sup>9</sup> This reinterpretation is somewhat justified: the Puritans may have believed themselves to be adherents of a hierarchical religious and social order, but by breaking from the Church of England and claiming their congregations had authority to interpret the Word of God, they extended the dispersal of authority begun by the Reformation. This shift gradually transferred the locus of meaning from the cathedral to the individual, thus making the continuity of the divine drama dependent on each individual rather than on the communal life of the church. At least in this regard, the Puritans paved the way for "the savage artist" who derived moral authority from his solitary relation to primitive nature. Rather than having to submit to their role as priests in the temple of God's creation, these individuals see themselves as free agents in something akin to Morton's "ecological mesh" (*Ecological* 28).

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview of this historicizing, see Buell (*New England Literary* 193–201).

St. Peter's turn to a more medieval, Catholic order—where individual meaning comes from a drama based in the cathedral and not a solitary experience—does presage Cather's turn to a more communal form of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> His speech, however, brings up an important distinction between religion and art that has caused some confusion in Cather scholarship. Many Cather scholars believe that Cather viewed religion primarily as an aesthetic and cultural framework—that “her reach toward the church [in her later novels] was essentially a reach toward its outward manifestations, both aesthetic and as an institution providing stability” (Stout, *Willa Cather* 252).<sup>11</sup> St. Peter's equation of art and religion becomes a favorite proof text for this view, yet his claim that art and religion “are the same thing, in the end, of course” is ironic given his own inability to experience the happiness he attributes to religion's “gorgeous drama.” Because his artistic appreciation of life no longer derives from a belief in the truth of this aesthetic representation, St. Peter cannot meaningfully enter into this rich drama. He teases his faithful Catholic servant, Augusta, about the impossibility of her converting him back to the religion of his fathers (*Professor's* 25), and yet at the end of the novel she must literally save him from the apathy to which his non-religious, solely aesthetic view has led him: St. Peter cannot muster the strength to rise from his couch and open the window because he has lost the desire to live (*Professor's* 276–77). In his earlier speech St. Peter overlooks the fact that the king and the beggar did not enter the cathedral looking for an

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<sup>10</sup> While the concept of the “savage artist” surely relies on nature's moral authority, it also depends on the validity of the individual's interpretation of his own experience in nature. For the progression in American thought from nature as a source of authority to pragmatism's elevation of experience as the more foundational authority, see Roger Lundin's *From Nature to Experience*.

<sup>11</sup> Besides Stout, critics who take this view include Conrad Ostwalt—who claims Cather's fiction depicts a “secularized conception of American natural space” (38)—and Merrill Skaggs who sees Cather's religion primarily in psychological terms (“Willa Cather's Varieties” 396–98).

aesthetic experience; they entered because they believed in the truth of the drama enacted there. Once belief in the truth of the biblical drama is lost, its aesthetic value quickly fades. This is why, as T. S. Eliot warned, the Bible's aesthetic, cultural values cannot be easily extracted from its truth claims: "the Bible has had a *literary* influence upon English literature *not* because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered as the report of the Word of God" (98).<sup>12</sup> So while Cather certainly values the Catholic church for its aesthetic, dramatic vision of human life, we should not too easily equate her views with those of St. Peter's, particularly when his perspective is called into question by the action of the novel. The loss of cultural authority caused, in part, by the Protestant dispersal of meaning cannot be reversed by a merely aesthetic religion. People will only reorder their lives according to an aesthetic order, *Professor's House* suggests, if they believe in its truth.<sup>13</sup>

A more helpful way of understanding Cather's religious aesthetic is by looking at her own statements regarding the form she chose for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In a letter she wrote to *Commonweal*, a Catholic periodical, she explains her decision to write in the style of legend:

[M]y book was a conjunction of the general and the particular, like most works of the imagination. I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Geneviève in my student days, I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition. In the Golden Legend the martyrdoms of the Saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their

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<sup>12</sup> Of passing interest are Eliot's allusions to the Angelus in "The Dry Salvages" a few years after Cather's book. See Gatta for a brief analysis of Eliot's Marian references (*American Madonna* 133–34).

<sup>13</sup> This is why in my introduction I caution against the efforts of those like E. O. Wilson who use theology to further an environmental agenda while at the same time discounting theology's truth claims.

lives; it is as though all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance. (*Willa Cather on Writing* 9)

While she contrasts legend and drama, her description of measuring human experiences against a spiritual experience is similar to the “gorgeous drama” St. Peter discerned in medieval life. A saintly legend identifies everyone, regardless of their place in the social order, by their role in a divine order; social drama fades and all human actions, large and small, receive their import from their relation to Christ’s life. Blaise Pascal, in the section of *Pensées* that Cather cites at the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, describes this same idea in terms of how Christ’s death makes all human choices of equal importance: “Faire les petites choses comme grandes, à cause de la majesté de J.C. qui les faict en nous et qui vit nostre vie; et les grandes comme petites et aysées, à cause de sa toute puissance” (370).<sup>14</sup> In the religious form of legend, characters’ actions and choices become important for what they reveal about this primary spiritual relation to Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Cather’s use of legend in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* renders her characters members of a divinely ordered community; the prime reference points for their actions are not themselves or even their fellow humans, but rather the biblical narrative of redemption. This spiritual focus might seem to devalue the material world. As Mary-Ann and David Stouck conclude about the effect of the book’s form, “the ideal which

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<sup>14</sup> “Do little things as though they were great, because of the majesty of Jesus Christ who does them in us and who lives our life; do the greatest things as though they were little and easy, because of His omnipotence” (371). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Pascal are from H. F. Stewart.

<sup>15</sup> As Francis Coleman explains, “Pascal’s version of Christianity is radically Christocentric. . . . Pascal felt compelled to compose a brief meditation on what he was certain was the only certainty of which man is capable. . . . Pascal conceived of the ‘Mystery’ as transcending every social convention, every empirically tested hypothesis, every so-called axiom of physics or mathematics” (190). Pascal’s “Le Mistère de Jésus”—the section of *Pensées* to which Latour alludes—is a meditation on this one certainty around which we should order our lives.

underlies the book, and indeed all saints' legends, is the renunciation of the material world, and everything pertaining to it, for the greater life of the spirit. The Bishop and his vicar . . . choose to relinquish the material comforts and amenities of earthly life in devoting themselves to serving God" ("Hagiographical Style" 304).<sup>16</sup> Yet while renunciation is central to Cather's legend, it is not the renunciation of the material world—Cather's priests are in fact connoisseurs of fine food and drink, and Latour highly values material beauty—but rather the renunciation of the self as the epistemological and ethical authority.<sup>17</sup> Cather's legend offers concrete images, rather than abstract ideals, from the biblical story of redemption as authoritative ethical guides that shape her priests' lives. This is what makes *Death Comes for the Archbishop* a radically Catholic and, in Tate's terms, Southern book. Tate argues that in the Southern imagination, such "images are only to be contemplated, and perhaps the act of contemplation after long exercise initiates a habit of imitation, and the setting up of absolute standards which are less formulas for action than an interior discipline of mind" (*I'll Take My Stand* 169). Cather's normative images, like saintly tableau, model lives lived according to the absolute standard of "la majesté de J.C." and invite others into a life formed by this mental and spiritual discipline. Thus Cather's legend of two priests in the American Southwest takes a religious system of value and derives from this aesthetic images that function as standards by which human actions can be judged.

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<sup>16</sup> Other critics who read *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a medieval legend include Edward and Lilian Bloom (200) and Robin Warren (80).

<sup>17</sup> Daehnke reads portions of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in a similarly Gnostic fashion (217–225). See Hauerwas and Wood for one alternative to such readings.



It is because of these standards that some scholars criticize *Death Comes for the Archbishop* for its prescriptive, seemingly colonial perspective. Cather recognizes this danger. The religiously ordered community that she envisions would indeed limit its members' individual freedom and expression, and yet, as both Southern Agrarians and twenty-first century ecologists insist, without such limits a human individual can destroy the whole community. This is the dilemma that Cather's legend explores: can a religious ideal form and preserve a healthy community without oppressing certain members? The dangers of Cather's approach are starkly exemplified by Tate and the Southern Agrarians. Their loyalty to their communal heritage blinded them to the way Southern culture unjustly restricted the freedoms and possibilities of its non-white members. Yet this same loyalty provided them a rich tradition from which to critique the negative freedom encouraged by industry, a freedom to abstract oneself from one's community and place in order to be free to exploit them.

So although Cather attempts to imagine a religious order that places individuals within a divinely ordered ecological community without unjustly limiting their freedom, it is not surprising that many critics find the community represented in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to be oppressive. These critics worry that Cather's narrative valorizes Manifest Destiny and obscures the injustice suffered by Mexicans and Native Americans.<sup>18</sup> As Stout explains, Cather "believed the report of parties identified with the side that gained the upper hand, and she emphasized their rightness. Those who came to possess America did so, it seems, for reasons of divine plan" (*Willa Cather* 246). This

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<sup>18</sup> Scholars who view *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as escapist or implicitly oppressive include Ammons (133–34), Reynolds (25–27), Sevick (13–17), Stout (*Willa Cather* 237–46), Warner (265–73), and Wilson (153). Keeler addresses this conflict quite well by comparing Cather's style to Chavannes' frescoes of Ste Geneviève (119–120).

criticism must be taken seriously; it identifies the key danger in deriving an ecological ethic from religious belief. As Joel Daehnke argues, in his broader study of American literature, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and other “redemptive” texts tend to universalize dominant values and obscure marginalized cultures: “historically, the articulation of redemptive narratives has been laden with rhetorical strategies whose ideological aims are precisely such an elision; . . . they tend, at the expense of alternative worldviews, toward a valorization of a unique social vision, the value of whose attainment is constructed as a universalized good” (12). This is the sort of redemption against which Thoreau railed when he mocked his neighbors for “redeeming” swampland in order to pad their bottom line. Certainly, as Daehnke argues, religion has been used throughout American history to justify venal ends.

Yet even Thoreau, who so vehemently decried hypocrisy wherever he found it, did not reject religion because some people abused it. Rather, he sought a more honest religious vision that could correct those who would otherwise drain every swamp and cut down every tree. Many critics today may prefer a more relativistic approach to culture, but environmental criticism should recognize, as Thoreau did, that cultural and religious differences have real consequences for the survival of ecological communities and should therefore be judged and corrected carefully. Rather than criticizing every attempt to “valoriz[e] a unique social vision” in the service of a thoroughgoing cultural relativism, environmental criticism needs to do the more difficult work of examining the content and consequences of such visions.

This is the task Cather takes up in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the search for a religious order that can order individuals’ desires so that they do not pursue their

pleasure at the expense of the whole ecological community. Although Christianity has been used by some as a tool to weaken local cultures and further colonial exploitation, this is not the approach Cather's priests take. Their attitude follows that outlined by Pope John Paul II who writes, "The Gospel is not opposed to any culture, as if in engaging a culture the Gospel would seek to strip it of its native riches and force it to adopt forms which are alien to it. . . . [R]ather, they are prompted to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel's truth and to be stirred by this truth to develop in new ways" (91). Critics, then, who accuse Cather's book of legitimating Manifest Destiny or colonialism miss her point. Cather's priests are not to blame for the injustices of American expansion: these injustices would not have happened if the Spanish and American settlers had acted like these two French priests. And Cather did not write about these priests in order to obscure historical injustices. Instead of writing a tragic story about the many mistakes that were made in the settlement of the Southwest, she chose to write a legend, a hagiography that offers an alternative to violent, selfish forms of "redemption" and so might guide our future actions. The important question, then, is whether her priests do indeed practice an authentic multiculturalism, one that does not minimize differences but treats them with respect and seriousness. Environmental critics should sympathize with her effort, then, even if they ultimately disagree with Cather's vision.

The character of the religious order Cather imagines in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is the subject of the rest of this chapter. By this point, it should be clear that this religious order differs significantly from the order she imagines in her earlier prairie novels. As McDonald observes, Cather "replaced her heroic pioneer conquerors with men of the cloth, men who similarly faced hostility and potential death in a strange

country but were sustained by their faith” (72). Rather than imposing an order on untamed country by the force of an individual pioneer’s heroic will, Cather’s priests come to serve the communities of the American Southwest. They renounce their personal desires in order to cultivate a particular religious and aesthetic harmony among the many competing members of the ecological communities in these deserts.<sup>19</sup> Many scholars have noted the way the Catholic Church unifies the disparate human cultures in this narrative,<sup>20</sup> and a few have written about how the priests also bring together different species,<sup>21</sup> but the specific character of this reconciliation remains opaque. The following analysis argues that Cather imagines an ecological community whose human members shape their lives according to Mary’s assent to Gabriel’s proposal and Jesus’ assent to his Father’s will in Gethsemane. For by submitting to a divine order—as she does in her reply to Gabriel, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Lk. 1.38)—Mary ushers in the Incarnation, the event that unites the physical and spiritual, the human and divine, without dissolving their distinct identities. This Marian focus is not unique to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; Joann Krieg finds “scattered throughout Cather’s works . . . numerous indications of her strong leanings toward Marianism” (33–34). Krieg, however, focuses on Cather’s heroines who share similar names—Marie Shabata, Marian Forrester, and Myra Henshawe—and interprets these as childless depictions of failed Marys. It makes sense, then, that Cather would finally write

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<sup>19</sup> As the Stoucks argue in a slightly different context, that of artistic creation, “The vision then that lies at the center of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and that informs the novel through a pattern of self-conscious references is the renunciation of earthly power and ambition” (“Art and Religion” 295).

<sup>20</sup> See Reynolds (8), McDonald (77), Moseley (69), Birns (10), and Murphy (“Faith Community” 314–15). Steven Shively makes a similar argument regarding the integrative function of the Christmas tree in *My Antonia* (57).

<sup>21</sup> See Gersdorf (54–55) and Mutter (84, 88).

a book about Mary herself. As she wrote to one friend, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is not a novel because there are “[n]o women but the Virgin Mary” (*Calendar* 132).

While this is not quite true, it indicates the extent to which Mary functions as the central character in the priests’ lives.<sup>22</sup> Mary provides Cather with a way to participate in the restoration a harmonious ecological community, destroyed by Adam and Eve’s decision to determine good and evil for themselves, restored by the submission of Mary and Christ to God’s good.

In this reading, Cather’s work seems quite theologically informed, which may come as a surprise to those critics who downplay the importance of religion in her writing. Cather herself claimed that, contrary to the opinion of a reviewer, she was not “soaked . . . in Catholic lore” when she wrote *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (*Willa Cather on Writing* 11). Yet Edith Lewis qualifies this claim by noting that Cather did draw “on a large accumulated store of thought and knowledge” about Catholicism and that during the course of her writing she had many conversations with a friend who was helping to edit the Catholic Encyclopedia (148).<sup>23</sup> Critics have explored some of the Catholic elements in this book,<sup>24</sup> and these studies demonstrate that Cather’s imagination

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<sup>22</sup> While I will focus on Mary as a positive figure in this book, some critics, like Sharon O’Brien, see her more negatively, as a male sublimation of female sexuality “which [Latour’s] patriarchal religion domesticates in the figure of the Virgin” (203).

<sup>23</sup> It is also worth noting that one of her early journalistic projects was finishing a biography of Mary Baker Eddy. Parts of this book, particularly chapter eleven (Cather and Milmine 176–210), involve close analysis and critique of Eddy’s religious beliefs, and as David Stouck points out in his introduction, these sections demonstrate Cather’s keen philosophical and religious mind (xx).

<sup>24</sup> Murphy talks about these generally in “Willa Cather and Catholic Themes” (54–59) and elsewhere looks specifically at the influence of Dante (“Cather’s New World”), Leroux examines Pascal’s influence (54–59) (“Cather’s New World”), and Schwind places Cather’s narrative in the context of nineteenth-century Catholic politics (“Cather’s New World”). Others that look at this novel from theologically informed perspectives include Hauerwas and Wood (185–86) and Dooley (“Philosophical Pragmatism” 126).

was indeed profoundly shaped by her reading of Catholic authors. Extending these studies with a focus on two works that she explicitly connects to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—*The Golden Legend* and *Pensées*—will demonstrate how Cather imagines Mary and Gethsemane as antitypes of Eden that can guide humans seeking to redeem fallen ecological communities.

Cather's legend contains nine books, and several scholars have suggested these correspond to the nine bells of the Angelus. Robert Gale draws on this insight to argue that, as the nine bells of the Angelus are divided into three groups of three, so Cather's nine sections can be grouped into three sections. He claims these three sections follow the arc of the Ave Maria prayer, which is recited after every third bell of the Angelus: "The three thirds are unified through dealing with one subject, the bishop; yet separately they concern introductory, laudatory, and finally revelatory material. So it is with the three closely related parts of the Ave Maria prayer, which begins with an introductory statement, moves on to praise Mary, and closes with a plea that she use her power" (75).<sup>25</sup> When Bishop Latour first hears the Angelus rung in Santa Fé, it awakens him from a deep sleep: "he yet heard every stroke of the Ave Maria bell, marveling to hear it rung correctly (nine quick strokes in all, divided into threes, with an interval between); and from a bell with a beautiful tone" (*DCA* 45). The Angelus bell is known as the Ave Marie bell because it commemorates Gabriel's announcement to Mary (*DCA* 409).<sup>26</sup> In between each group of three bells, worshippers antiphonally recall three parts of Mary's

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<sup>25</sup> While other scholars suggest different ways of interpreting this link, many concur with Gale that the Angelus structures Cather's narrative: see Giannone (186–87), Skaggs ("Cather's Mystery" 403), and the Stoucks ("Hagiographical Style" 296).

<sup>26</sup> For a brief history of the development of the Ave Maria, see Warner (306–308).

annunciation: her conception of Jesus, her submission to God, and the resultant Incarnation. The discussion of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that follows examines how each third of the book applies these three moments in Mary's annunciation to the tensions within the American Southwest to imagine how the French priests can work toward a harmonious, incarnational community. Cather's legend takes its formal, aesthetic order, then, from Mary's assent to participate in the Incarnation. In her legend, as in *The Golden Legend*, all of her priests' "human experiences" are measured against the "supreme spiritual experience[s]" of Mary's assent to Gabriel and Jesus' submission to the Father in Gethsemane (*Willa Cather on Writing* 9).

*Bearing Christ in the Garden of Agony*

The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.  
And she conceived of the Holy Ghost. (*Catechism* 44)

This first portion of the Angelus describes Mary's role as the bearer of the Son of God. Gabriel's declaration enables her, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to conceive Jesus and to carry him into the world. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Latour and Vaillant take up this Marian role and bear Jesus to all the members of the desert community. They learn to carry Jesus to all people and species, even those that seem to be opposed to them or in conflict with each other. Cather envisions an incarnational ecological community, then, as she portrays these priests reconciling competing individuals by bearing Jesus to them in love. This theological order harmonizes different cultural orders while guiding individuals to participate in a divine drama by relinquishing their personal wills.

In the Prologue to her book, Cather indicates that the precondition of bearing Christ to all is a radical submission to a divine system of value. The Spanish Cardinal tells the missionary who is visiting him a story about his great-grandfather who was a wealthy man with a fine collection of Spanish paintings. When, long ago, another priest from New Spain came to beg for funds, he asked for a painting to hang in one of the mission churches. The Cardinal's great-grandfather told this priest he could have whichever painting he preferred, but when the priest chose an El Greco, the collector was reluctant to part with it and urged him to take one more suited to Indian tastes. The missionary's reply cut to the core of this excuse: "You refuse me this picture because it is a good picture. *It is too good for God, but it is not too good for you*" (DCA 13). The collector relented and gave the missionary his painting, but his great-grandson the Cardinal still hopes to recover this lost masterpiece.

This prefatory story introduces the challenge that Latour and Vaillant will face: they must give their best to God and follow his standard of value instead of their own. Their guide in this is Mary, who provides an alternative to Eve's failure in Eden when she disobeyed God's command and ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve wanted to choose for herself what was good and, like the Cardinal's ancestor, keep this good for herself. As early as the second century, church fathers began interpreting Mary as the "second Eve," the "key to this typological reading [being] the opposition disobedience/obedience" (David L. Jeffrey, "Mary, Mother of Jesus" 489).<sup>27</sup> Mary obeys God's command, even when it brings her great pain and suffering, and by

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<sup>27</sup> For more background on the interpretive tradition of Mary as a second Eve, see Warner (50–67) and Pelikan (39–52). For sources that Cather would have known, see De Voragine's *The Golden Legend* (2: 93–94) and *The Catholic Encyclopedia* entry on "Virgin Mary" (Maas 15: 464D–468).



doing so she lives as if nothing is too good for God. Her obedience enables her to participate in God's incarnation and to be a means of bringing divine redemption. This submission is also modeled by Jesus in Gethsemane where he asks for this cup of suffering to be taken away but then prays, "nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk. 22.42). By submitting to the Father's will, Jesus agrees to be the means of redemption despite the personal suffering this will entail. Only those who recognize the authority of God's will can give up an El Greco masterpiece, a comfortable home, and whatever else it might cost to bring the Incarnation to a fallen world. This radical submission leads to what William James describes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*—a book Skaggs argues influenced the composition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* ("Willa Cather's Varieties" 101–121)—as an "inward tranquility" (*Varieties* 229). This peacefulness stems from a surrender to God's will: "Whoever not only says, but *feels*, 'God's will be done,' is mailed against every weakness; and the whole historic array of martyrs, missionaries, and religious reformers is there to prove the tranquil-mindedness, under naturally agitating or distressing circumstances, which self-surrender brings" (*Varieties* 230). James cites Pascal as an example of this temperament, and Cather seems to model Latour on the tranquil-minded missionary that James describes here, one capable of the radical obedience that must define these French priests if they are to fruitfully bear Jesus to all those in New Spain.

The first book of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* opens with a chapter titled "The Cruciform Tree." Cather emphasizes here at the beginning of her legend "the supreme spiritual experience" against which Latour must measure his life, and as the chapter title indicates, Cather connects this supreme experience to the tree that helps

Latour find his role in God's drama of redemption. Latour's submission before this tree results in his redemptive conception of Jesus' incarnation and passion that will bear fruit later in his life. We are introduced to the titular Bishop after he has lost himself and his horses in the trackless desert of his new Vicariate.<sup>28</sup> As he tries to guide his horses through a maze of parched, red hills, he suddenly comes upon a distinctively shaped tree, a naked juniper that had grown into a perfect cross shape: "Living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the cross" (*DCA* 18). Latour kneels before this tree for half an hour, praying and reading in devotion. These devotions reorient him and cause him to relate to his horses with greater respect. As he kneels before the tree, the narrator describes Latour's relation with those around him: "He had a kind of courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing" (*DCA* 18). When he rises, he demonstrates this courtesy by talking to his mare not in his own native French, but "in halting Spanish," the language to which she would be accustomed (*DCA* 19).

When Latour remounts and continues on, his extreme thirst causes him to further identify with Christ's cross:

He reminded himself of that cry, wrung from his Saviour on the Cross, "*J'ai soif!*" Of all our Lord's physical sufferings, only one, "I thirst," rose to His lips. Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself out of his own consciousness and meditated upon the anguish of his Lord. The Passion of Jesus became for him the only reality; the need of his own body was but a part of that conception. (*DCA* 19)

Through his physical deprivations and his meditation, Latour obeys the biblical injunction to partake in Christ's suffering (1 Pet. 4.13). He also responds to Pascal's

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<sup>28</sup> Leroux compares the "geometrical nightmare" Latour experiences in this desert, where the repeated triangles of the hills disorient and confuse him, to Pascal's geometrical theology (213–217).

deep sense of Jesus' isolation in his Passion: "Jésus est seul dans la terre, non seulement qui ressent et partage sa peine, mais qui la scache; le ciel et luy sont seuls dans cette connoissance" (366).<sup>29</sup> By thirsting like Jesus during the Passion, Latour joins Christ in Gethsemane, the garden of suffering where, Pascal imagines, "Jésus sera en agonie jusqu'à la fin du monde: il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce temps là" (366).<sup>30</sup> Jesus' disciples had fallen asleep, failing to obey his command to "watch and pray" (Matt. 26.41), so Pascal tells his readers to make up for this disobedience by their own obedience. While Latour had failed to be "cautious and watchful" when he wandered off the path (*DCA* 23), he is no longer drowsy and distracted but is now watching and praying. His intense, meditative attention causes his own thirst to become part of the divine conception. He now, like Mary, conceives the Word and begins to bear Him to a dry, needy world.

Latour's mystical conception of Jesus' Passion does not immediately lead him to physical salvation, but it does give him a greater sympathy with his animals; it reminds him of both his intimate connection with them and his responsibility to them. Directly following the passage above, Cather describes this realization: "His mare stumbled, breaking the mood of contemplation. He was sorrier for his beasts than for himself. He, supposed to be the intelligence of the party, had got the poor animals into this interminable desert of ovens. He was afraid he had been absent-minded, had been pondering his problem instead of heeding the way" (*DCA* 20). Latour now recognizes that his failure to pay attention had hurt not only himself but also his fellow animals. As

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<sup>29</sup> "Jesus is alone on earth, without a single one to feel and share His suffering, nay, even to know of it; heaven and He are alone in that knowledge" (367).

<sup>30</sup> "Jesus will be in agony while the world lasts: we must not sleep the while" (367).

Adam and Eve's fall brought a curse on all of creation, so Latour's mistake hurts those around him. Yet, as Pascal writes, Jesus' redemption has a similarly expansive reach: "Jésus est dans un jardin, non de délices comme le premier Adam, où il se perdit et tout le genre humain, mais dans un de supplices, où il s'est sauvé et tout le genre humain" (366).<sup>31</sup> While Pascal only includes "tout le genre humain" here, in Romans Paul extends this suffering and waiting for redemption to non-human creation: "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. . . . [E]ven we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, *to wit*, the redemption of our body." (Rm. 8.22-23). Cather follows Paul's expansion of redemption, representing the non-human creation by Latour's animals. By joining Christ in his garden of suffering, Latour learns to take responsibility for the consequences of his carelessness and begins to be more watchful and prayerful and so participate in God's redemption of all creation.

Nevertheless, his intelligence cannot find the way out of this desert maze, and he and his animals are saved by a combination of divine grace and animal instincts. After leaving the cruciform tree, Latour simply urges his animals onward until suddenly "he felt a change in the body of his mare" and both horses begin to move more quickly (*DCA* 23). These animals sense water long before Latour does, but when they all arrive at *Agua Secreta*, their host attributes their rescue not to the animals, but to "the Blessed Virgin" who must have led the priest here to preside over marriages and baptisms (*DCA* 26). That evening, as Latour goes to bed, grateful to be lying "in comfort and safety, with love for his fellow creatures flowing like peace about his heart," he concludes that his mare

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<sup>31</sup> "Jesus is in a garden, not one of delight like that of the first Adam in which he wrought the ruin of himself and all the human race, but one of suffering, in which He wrought salvation for Himself and all the human race" (367).

was indeed guided by Mary (*DCA* 30). And while he imagines that Vaillant would interpret this miracle “against” Nature—as a supernatural intervention in the natural world—Latour appreciates how the divine work occurred “with Nature,” how Mary used the animals’ perception of water to lead them here.<sup>32</sup>

Latour’s understanding of divine restoration “with Nature”—an understanding that challenges a spirit/matter dualism—is clarified by his vision of Pedro’s flock of Angora goats as members of the redeemed. Latour is out for a walk after performing religious services at *Agua Secreta* when this flock rushes past, looking at him “with their mocking, humanly intelligent smile” (*DCA* 31). Their “dazzling” white hair causes the Bishop to think “about the whiteness of them that were washed in the blood of the Lamb” (*DCA* 32). Latour knows his theology is “mixed” and that it is the sheep who are saved while the goats are condemned to punishment. Nevertheless, he justifies his inclusive vision of these goats by telling “himself that their fleece had warmed many a good Christian, and that their rich milk nourished sickly children” (*DCA* 32). Latour sees God’s hand in these natural blessings, and so his incarnational theology includes both these neglected Mexicans and their goats as members of the redeemed. Like Muir who emphasized the universal reach of God’s natural revelation, including even bears and other animals, Latour sees the Incarnation’s redemption as extending to all.

This opening scene reveals at least two important aspects of the incarnate redeemer Latour bears. First, even though he conceives Jesus’ Passion and then carries

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<sup>32</sup> As Dooley points out, this difference between Latour and Vaillant follows a debate among Thomists about the relationship between grace and nature. Dooley states, “In the classical scholastic terminology of St. Thomas Aquinas, the supernatural does not subvert or replace the natural but builds upon it” (“Philosophical Pragmatism” 126). This is how Latour understands grace and nature, but other interpreters of Thomas would see this relationship more in Vaillant’s terms.

its salvific fruit to this isolated community—he brings them Mass and the other sacraments in his priestly role as Christ’s representative (*DCA* 28)—Latour cannot even save himself. As Mary bore her Savior, so Latour remains in need of the redemption he offers to others. Pascal articulates this nuance of Christian redemption when he writes, “Il faut adjoûter mes playes aux siennes, et me joinder à luy, et il me sauvera en se sauvant” (370).<sup>33</sup> Latour is not responsible or able to save himself; he must simply join himself to Jesus and share in his sufferings, so that by saving himself, Jesus will also save those joined to him. By staying humbly submitted to God’s will, then, Latour acknowledges that redemption does not come from him but to him, and only because he has been redeemed can he participate in bearing God’s redemption to others.

Second, Latour recognizes that the incarnate God he bears does not offer some Gnostic redemption from the physical world but rather a restoration of an original harmony that includes all members of creation. This inclusive salvation is revealed throughout this story: Latour’s officiation of marriages and baptisms indicates God’s concern with proper human relationships; Latour’s “love for his fellow creatures” blossoms after he conceives Jesus’ Passion; and he envisions Pedro’s flock of goats as representatives of those who will enjoy heavenly life. By becoming human, Jesus unites the divine and material that were separated by the Edenic fall. And as Adam and Eve’s disobedience brought a curse on all creation, so Jesus’ obedience begins the redemption

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<sup>33</sup> Stewart translates this passage as follows: “I must add my wounds to His and join me to Him, and, saving me, He will save Himself. But henceforth I must add no more” (Pascal 371). The French grammar of the first sentence is slightly different, however, and could be translated more accurately as, “I must add my wounds to His and join myself to him, and He will save me in saving Himself.” Pascal’s grammar indicates that God’s redemptive focus is Christ, and all who belong to him will then participate in this salvation. Pascal does not figure himself, as Stewart’s translation suggests, as the privileged focus of salvation but rather as one who gratefully receives its benefits.

of all creation as he makes possible the restoration of the harmonious ecological community that existed in Eden.

The means by which Latour hopes to achieve this divine, inclusive redemption become clearer in the Marian focus of the next chapters. On Christmas evening, Latour is writing a letter to his brother about the difficulties of learning to work with Americans and Mexicans. He explains that he and Vaillant have to dress and talk like Americans and that they have a hard time finding good French food; Latour brought a precious bottle of olive oil all the way from Colorado just so Vaillant could make salad dressing (*DCA* 38). As Latour writes, he looks up and sees the evening-star, which causes him to begin humming *Ave Maris Stella* (*DCA* 39). This ninth-century Latin hymn celebrates the peace that Mary's obedience brings. Its second verse punningly figures her as the second Eve:

Sumens illud Ave  
Gabrielis ore,  
funda nos in pace,  
mutans nomen Evae. (Raby 94)<sup>34</sup>

Mary reverses Eve's fall precisely at the moment that she responds obediently to Gabriel's "Ave" and submits to the divine will. This response must guide Latour if he is to reconcile the competing New World cultures and species in peaceful harmony. Latour must learn, like Mary, to surrender his personal will and his French tastes, and to follow God's will for this place.

This surrender gives birth to a fruitful peace among disparate members. The Bishop experiences this when, on his first morning back from a long trip, he wakes up to

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<sup>34</sup> Warner's translation of this verse reads, "Receiving that Ave from the lips of Gabriel, establish us in peace, changing Eva's name" (60).

the sound of the Angelus being rung. This sound sends him on a whirlwind geographical tour: he first thinks he is back in Rome, then perhaps in Jerusalem, although he has never been there, then he imagines himself in New Orleans, and finally in the south of France (*DCA* 45–46). Latour experiences each of these different places in the time it takes the bell to ring nine times. When he asks Vaillant about where the bell came from, the reason for these diverse cultural destinations becomes clearer. Vaillant found this bell in the church basement. Dated 1356, it had been cast by the Spanish from silver and gold given in gratitude for a victory over the Moors. As Latour ponders this story, he realizes that it must have been made with techniques the Spanish learned from the Moors.<sup>35</sup> So this bell's exquisite tone is an emblem of the beauty that the church can bring from cultural and religious exchanges, even those marked by violence. The diverse cultures its sound calls up testify to the Incarnation's ability to bring together different cultures without eliminating real differences; within one note each of these places and cultures maintains its distinct existence.

This bell, then, is particularly suited to ring the Angelus, which, as suggested earlier, forms Cather's imagination of Mary as a guide to restoring a peaceful ecological community after the discord wrought by the fall. The Angelus prayer consists of three phrases, each followed by a Hail Mary:

The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.  
And she conceived of the Holy Ghost. Hail Mary, &c.  
Behold the handmaid of the Lord.  
Be it done unto me according to Thy Word. Hail Mary, &c.  
And the Word was made flesh.  
And dwelt among us. Hail Mary, &c. (*Catechism* 44)

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<sup>35</sup> Murphy's notes indicate that Cather exaggerates the bell's multicultural history, making these details even more significant (*DCA* 409–410).



From Mary's conception of Jesus and her obedience to the divine will, the Incarnation is made possible. And it is the Incarnation that reconciles the seemingly irreparable rift between God and humanity, opened by Adam and Eve's disobedience in Eden, and the resultant rifts formed between different members of creation. After the last of the nine bells, a final prayer is said: "Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of an angel, may, by His Passion and cross, be brought to the glory of His resurrection, through the same Christ Our Lord" (*Catechism* 44). This prayer elucidates Latour's earlier participation in the Passion and cross; as a more recent Catholic prayer book explains, the Angelus "is a reminder that each of us is invited to bring Christ into the world through our lives" (Downside Abbey 148). Latour accepts this invitation as he seeks to bear Christ's peace to the cultural conflicts of the American Southwest, in the hope that by doing so, a harmonious community might be achieved.

When Vaillant worries that Latour's story about the bell's Moorish origins would "make my bell out an infidel" (*DCA* 47), he changes the subject and leads Latour to a native priest who has just returned from the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Yet this shrine commemorates an equally multicultural religion, and it confirms Mary's status as the guide of those who would bear Christ to all cultures. Vaillant explains that the Catholics who live in the Americas cherish this miracle because they "regard it as the one absolutely authenticated appearance of the Blessed Virgin in the New World, and a witness of Her affection for Her Church on this continent" (*DCA* 49). By appearing to a poor Mexican peasant, Mary assures the Catholic converts that God cares for them, and Vaillant is so moved by hearing about this priest's pilgrimage, that he wants to travel to

this shrine himself. Latour has less need of miraculous appearances; in keeping with his earlier belief that Mary led him to *Agua Secreta* “with Nature,” he tells Vaillant, “the Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always” (*DCA* 54). For Latour, the miraculous is always present because God has already become human and entered his creation; human eyes can perceive this reality when they are opened by love. Latour experienced this sharpened perception when his meditation before the cruciform tree enabled him to be “watchful” and awake to his animals’ needs; he feels “love for his fellow creatures flowing like peace about his heart” after he shares in Jesus’ obedient sacrifice. Only when Cather’s priests see with the redeemer’s love will they be able to watch and pray for God’s incarnational kingdom to be realized in the American Southwest.

This loving reconciliation will not be easy, as Latour and Vaillant realize anew on their difficult missionary journeys. In addition to more dramatic episodes—like when the priests narrowly escape death at the hands of Buck Scales—Latour’s experiences with the enigmatic Indian culture and the rugged landscape lead him to worry that his missionary efforts are doomed. The land itself seems hopelessly disordered:

The mesa had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness, as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape. (*DCA* 99–100)

This place of endless diversity could easily frustrate the efforts of Latour, a “French arrange[r]” (*DCA* 10), to cultivate a divine order here. Indeed, when he and his Indian

guide Jacinto cross this wild country to reach Ácoma, Latour finds the human church there to be neglected and almost entirely dead: “He felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures; for types of life so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells, that the sacrifice on Calvary could hardly reach back so far” (*DCA* 106). Latour struggles to bear Christ to these “creatures” in this wild country, and he has little hope that the Incarnation might actually take root here and bear fruit.

It is in discouraging times like these that a priest might be tempted to turn aside from the difficult calling to share in the Passion and cross of Jesus. Latour hears about a former priest here at Ácoma who did just that, who chose to wall himself in and follow his own will instead of patiently bearing Christ to a broken world. Fray Baltazar built a “warlike” church here, which “was more like a fortress than a place of worship” (*DCA* 106). Inside, he hoarded the best seeds for his “enclosed garden” and forced the native women to laboriously water his plants (*DCA* 108). He claimed the choice portions of his parishioners’ flocks and crops and used his position to satisfy his appetitive desires; instead of praying with Jesus “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done” (Matt. 6.10), he attempted to rule “his garden like a little kingdom” (*DCA* 113).<sup>36</sup> The people he was supposed to serve grew to resent his tyranny, so when he killed one of his servants in a fit of rage, they threw him off their mesa and did without a priest for many years. Baltazar did not submit his life to a divine order but, like Adam and Eve, chose to eat what he thought looked good.

This is the temptation Latour must resist; faced with cultures he cannot fully understand and with a country that is unformed and apparently disordered, Latour does

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<sup>36</sup> As McDonald notes, gardens in this book “frequently signify the spiritual condition of the gardener” (74).

not try to forcefully “redeem” them according to his own standards of order. This is the human “redemption” that Thoreau warns against and that Latour knows will fail, just as Baltazar’s once carefully tended garden has now withered and died. Instead, he shares in Jesus’ Passion and learns to watch those around him with love, praying that some miracle of redemption might occur. At the end of the third book, Cather leaves her priest waiting, like Mary, for his conception of Jesus’ Passion to bear fruit. Latour is learning to avoid the mistakes of Eve and Baltazar by surrendering his personal will and French tastes in order to seek an understanding of God’s will for this place. He follows Mary’s example of participating in the Incarnation as a way to harmonize competing groups, a way based on submission to God’s will and patient cultivation of His order.

*Rejecting the Serpent’s Temptation*

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.  
Be it done unto me according to Thy Word. (*Catechism* 44)

In the fourth book of her legend, Cather brings her bishop face-to-face with the religious traditions of Jacinto’s Indian tribe. Yet even as he spends more time with Jacinto—visiting his home and family, traveling with him, and ultimately descending into the sacred, stone-lipped cavern that represents the heart of the Pecos Indian religion—Latour remains unable to understand Indian religious traditions. As a Catholic missionary, it would make sense for him simply to condemn these pagan religious practices; yet what is remarkable about his engagement with this Indian tradition is his refusal to make decisive moral determinations. Instead, he patiently cultivates a deeper, more personal understanding of these Indians and their culture, watching and praying in the hope that God will bring about his reconciliation between the European and Indian

peoples now living in this place. Latour's watchful, patient attitude stems from his refusal to follow Adam and Eve in their attempt to be like God by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. His humility contrasts with the self-centered rule of the previous priestly regime, represented by Fathers Martínez and Lucero. These men share in common "the love of authority" and, like Adam and Eve, base their moral judgments on what appeals to their personal tastes (*DCA* 169). This Edenic temptation to be like God and decide right and wrong for one's self must be rejected, for even if Ivar and other "savage artists" choose to care for other creatures, they establish a dangerous precedent of libertarian freedom that individuals like Wick Cutter and Father Martínez can exploit.

In contrast to this moral "freedom," Latour's Marian submission to divine authority enables him to contribute to Mary's work of cultural reconciliation. In his interactions with Jacinto, Latour does not act as the arbiter of cultural authority, judging Jacinto's culture according to his French standards. Rather, he respectfully tries to learn from these cultures and incorporates what he can from them into the already multi-cultural Catholic Church. For instance, he notices that when Jacinto speaks, in either Spanish or English, he omits articles before nouns. But Latour observes that this habit "seemed to be a matter of taste, not ignorance. In the Indian conception of language, such attachments were superfluous and unpleasing, perhaps" (*DCA* 96). Latour's recognition of Jacinto's linguistic aesthetic enables him to respect and value his culture. So when they begin comparing their views on the stars—Latour thinks they are "worlds, like ours" and Jacinto sees them as "leaders—great spirits" (*DCA* 97)—Latour does not try to force the scientific assessment of the stars on Jacinto. Rather, they end their

conversation by kneeling together and saying the “*Our Father*” (*DCA* 98). Their cultures may have different views on language and stars, but their friendship is based on their common religious faith that leaves room for these differences.

Latour’s respect for Jacinto’s culture is tested when he hears rumors that the members of the Pecos community worship a large rattlesnake and sacrifice human babies to it (*DCA* 129). When a blizzard forces Jacinto and Latour to take refuge in a stone-lipped cavern that has some mysterious connection with the Indian religion, these rumors, and the “fetid odour” of the cave, give Latour “an extreme distaste for the place” (*DCA* 134). And yet in spite of what he later describes as his feeling of “repugnance” toward the cave (*DCA* 141), Latour watches with interest and curiosity the odd rituals Jacinto performs here. The cold, the disagreeable smell, and the dizzying roar of the subterranean river trouble the Bishop, but he remains fascinated by the cave, even hoping to catch Jacinto asleep so that he could explore it without violating “Indian good manners.” And as they did after their conversation about the stars, Latour and Jacinto say a “*Pater Noster*” together before going to sleep (*DCA* 139). When confronted with parts of Jacinto’s traditional religion that he cannot understand, Latour remains watchful and prayerful, seeking to learn what the Indians believe. After this night in the cave, Latour asks an old trader what he knows about these Indian traditions. The trader offers his conjectures and concludes, “The things they value most are worth nothing to us. They’ve got their own superstitions, and their minds will go round and round in the same old ruts till Judgment Day” (*DCA* 143). Instead of being discouraged by this assessment, Latour explains that he admires the Indians’ “veneration for old customs. . . , and that it played a great part in his own religion” (*DCA* 143). Latour withholds judgment about the parts of

the Indian religion that remain unknown to him, and he learns from and incorporates those elements that he can.

In his approach to the native cultures of the American Southwest, Latour follows the advice Pascal gives at the end of “le Mistère de Jésus”: “*Eritis sicut dii scientes bonum et malum*. Tout le monde fait le dieu en jugeant: ‘Cela est bon ou mauvais’; et s’affligeant ou se réjouissant trop des événements” (370).<sup>37</sup> Pascal warns against putting oneself in the position of God and choosing what is good and what is evil; this is what Adam and Eve did when they chose to be like God and eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Using Jesus’ counter example in Gethsemane, where he submitted to God’s good will, Pascal counsels humans not to be quick to pass moral judgments but rather to accept God’s laws. Latour, then, practices humility and patient obedience in his interactions with Indian culture.<sup>38</sup> He is able to do this because, as we noted regarding his rescue from the trackless desert in the beginning of the book, Latour sees himself not primarily as an agent of God’s redemptive will, but as its subject. He is not responsible for accomplishing what he understands to be the divine will, he is only responsible for faithfully bearing Jesus to this place and for participating in the reconciliation accomplished by the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus. Thus he does not respond to Jacinto’s mysterious actions or words by pronouncing judgment, but by praying with him and continuing to watch.

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<sup>37</sup> “‘*Ye shall be as gods knowing good and evil.*’ Each man plays the god when he passes judgment, saying ‘This is good or bad’; and in rejoicing or mourning too much over what happens” (371).

<sup>38</sup> For a more extended analysis of Cather’s portrayal of missions in this book, see Dooley. He argues, “Cather assumes that obeying the missionary impulse is not, *per se*, a form of violence nor is it necessarily objectionable. However, when proselytizers of indigenous people seek a wholesale societal change, Cather endorses neither cultural hegemony nor religious imperialism” (“Is Proselytizing” 25).

While Latour follows Jesus' command in the Garden of Gethsemane to watch and pray and wait for the redemption that God will effect, Martínez and Lucero continue to act like Adam and Eve in Eden. These priests determine good and evil according to their own desires, and they reject the communal authority of the church, which is what helps keep Latour in his properly obedient place. Because Martínez and Lucero follow Adam and Eve in their rebellion, they experience and inflict on others the consequences of this rebellion: they are enslaved to their desires and they bring enmity and death to those around them.

Martínez thinks that by submitting to no one he can best achieve his own desires. He justifies this position to Bishop Latour, his superior in the church hierarchy, by claiming that his own authority and morality derive from nature. He legitimates his sexual promiscuity by telling Latour that celibacy is not natural (*DCA* 153). And Martínez warns the Bishop not to interfere with his parish because he governs it by natural rights:

Nature has got the start of you here. . . . We have a living church here, not a dead arm of the European Church. Our religion grew out of the soil, and has its own roots. We pay a filial respect to the person of the Holy Father, but Rome has no authority here. . . . The Church the Franciscan Fathers planted here was cut off; this is a second growth, and is indigenous. (*DCA* 154)

Martínez's claim to natural authority is clearly his justification for being his own authority and for continuing to run his parish according to his own desires for sex and wealth. Latour takes a more complex view of nature, knowing that in natural ecosystems, no individual remains unchecked as Martínez desires to be. Ecological communities thrive in complex, interdependent relationships, through which various members exert pressure on each other. Martínez does not want to submit himself to the communal



checks that Latour seeks to impose. Rather, he tells the Bishop that if he tries to discipline him, “I will organize my own church” (*DCA* 154). Martínez here sounds like the Protestant extreme represented by Cather’s earlier character Ivar, one who will split from the church in order to maintain individual control.

The next day at Mass, Bishop Latour admires Martínez’s fine voice and the fervor with which he celebrates the Eucharist: “Rightly guided, the Bishop reflected, this Mexican might have been a great man” (*DCA* 157). But because he refuses to be guided and insists on being his own authority, Martínez lives in bondage to his own desires. In particular, Martínez is controlled by his lust. He tells the Bishop, “Celibate priests lose their perceptions” and claims that those who fall into “concupiscence” experience grace more fully (*DCA* 153). Yet Cather’s rather revolting depiction of his face portrays him not as attuned to the divine, but as subject to the tyranny of his own desires: “His mouth was the very assertion of violent, uncurbed passions and tyrannical self-will; the full lips thrust out and taut, like the flesh of animals distended by fear or desire” (*DCA* 147). While he tries to assert his authority, he actually is ruled by his own fear and desire. It is no coincidence that while Latour meditates for half an hour at the foot of a cross-shaped tree, the crucifix in Martínez’s house is hidden behind dust and disorder, its sacrificial order apparently forgotten. Instead of measuring his life against Christ’s supreme spiritual experience and thereby participating in the redemption of his community, Martínez strives to rule and exploit others, only to find himself deformed by his desire’s tyrannical rule.

Trinidad, probably one of Martínez’s many children (*DCA* 162), exemplifies the stultifying effects of being enslaved to “natural” desire. The Bishop first sees Trinidad

sleeping with his head on a book, and when he is later introduced to him during dinner, Trinidad's "whole attention was fixed upon the mutton stew. . . . When his attention left his plate for a moment, it was fixed in the same greedy way upon the girl who served the table. . . . The student gave the impression of being always stupefied by one form of sensual disturbance or another" (*DCA* 151–52). In stark contrast to the Bishop, who has been learning to watch and pray, Trinidad sees only those things—sleep, food, sex—which might satiate his passions.

Father Lucero, unlike Martínez and Trinidad, severely disciplines his physical desires—he eats poor food and has never been accused of breaking his vow of celibacy—but he denies these desires only because he is in bondage to money: "He had the lust for money as Martínez had for women" (*DCA* 170). Cather's description of Martínez's face as "distended by fear or desire" indicates that being controlled by desire often leads to fear, and Lucero's greed causes him to be afraid of anything or anyone that might take his money from him. For instance, when a traveler hears about Lucero's great wealth and sneaks into his house at night to rob him, Lucero overpowers the much younger man and stabs him to death. When his neighbors hear the ruckus and come to investigate, they find "the Padre's chamber like a slaughter-house" (*DCA* 172). Lucero's greed has turned his house, which should be a locus of service and ministry, into a place of fear and death.

As this killing indicates, these priests live in bondage to their own desires, so they do not cultivate and serve their communities but rather harm them: Lucero murders a man who tries to rob him, and Father Martínez profits from the deaths of seven men for which he seems to be responsible. Apparently Martínez incited some Taos Indians to rebel against the Americans, and when seven of them were sentenced to be hung, he agreed to

save their lives only if they would sign their rich farms over to him. Once they did, he went on vacation until after they were executed, and ever since this event, his land holdings “made him quite the richest man in the parish” (*DCA* 146). In addition, Martínez regularly debauches devout young girls and lives in “open scandal” (*DCA* 165), which certainly hurts the reputation and ministry of the church.

When Father Lucero becomes sick and knows he is dying, he sends for Father Vaillant to come, receive his confession, and administer last rights. As Vaillant travels to Arroyo Hondo, where Lucero lives, he imagines this place as he has seen it in early spring. This imagined vision offers a stark contrast to the damage caused by the unchecked priests who, in trying to be like gods, enslave themselves and bring death to their communities. From the barren desert, Vaillant remembers coming suddenly to the edge of this deep ditch and looking down on the fertile

world of green fields and gardens. . . . The men and mules walking about down there, or ploughing the fields, looked like the figures of a child’s Noah’s ark. Down the middle of the arroyo, through the sunken fields and pastures, rushed a foaming creek which came from the high mountains. By merely laying a box-trough in sections up the face of the cliff, the Mexicans conveyed a stream from that creek up to the high plateau. Father Vaillant always stopped at the head of the trail, to watch the imprisoned water leaping out into the sunlight like a thing alive. (*DCA* 174–75)

By directing this precious water up to the barren desert, the Mexican community cultivates life. Cather’s reference to Noah reinforces the Marian and Gethsemane theme that individual submission to a divine order brings reconciliation and life to all of creation: Noah submitted to God’s odd command to build a boat, and by doing so, he saved his family and members of each animal species. Similarly, the community of Arroyo Hondo spreads their oasis to the surrounding plains by controlling and directing

the “foaming” creek that ran wildly off the mountains. The water itself may seem “imprisoned” in this trough, and yet it becomes “a thing alive” as it follows the guide laid out by the community. Not only does the water come to life itself, but it also bears life to other members in this ecological community.<sup>39</sup> Martínez is right to accuse Latour of trying to order nature; Latour, however, does not attempt to order nature around his individual desires, but around God’s original creation of harmonious ecological community. Because he says to God, “thy will be done,” he follows Christ’s example and seeks to bring reconciliation and health to those around him. And through his submission he participates, like the directed water, in a healthy, living community.

*Welcoming all into the “Holy Family”*

And the Word was made flesh.  
And dwelt among us. (*Catechism* 44)

Because Latour resists the temptation to order his diocese around his own desires, he remains open to experiencing and participating in God’s wild, redemptive order. The final third of Cather’s legend, which begins with the book titled “The Great Diocese,” describes the way Latour and Vaillant’s obedience to this order begins to bear fruit. *Diocese* comes from a Greek word meaning “housekeeping” or “administration”—interestingly this Greek word is also related to the word from which *ecology* derives, *oikos*—and Cather’s adjective “great” suggests her priests learn to administer a large, inclusive household. They do this by remembering that it is not their household but God’s. This may seem like a simple distinction, but as the other authors in this study

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<sup>39</sup> As Hauerwas and Wood point out, “Far more admirable than either the Americans who live in contempt for nature or the Indians who worship it uncritically are the Mexicans who have embraced Christianity without abandoning their deep regard for the rhythms of the world” (182).

attest, acknowledging and living according to the divine ownership of all creation has far-reaching consequences. In particular, Latour and Vaillant can love and learn from the other inhabitants of this diocese because they know that all of them are already members of God's household. The priests come to understand their work, then, as a participation in God's ongoing redemptive and reconciliatory housekeeping. Mary, as the mother of God and the one who invites all to enter into God's family, continues to inspire the priests in their gardening and missionary work. She models for them a way to lovingly cultivate a reconciled divine family.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this is the section of her legend where Cather depicts most clearly the connections between Mary's submission to Gabriel, Christ's submission to the Father in Gethsemane, and the life-giving reconciliation that these acts of submission bring. These connections are not original to Cather; two of the sources she draws on in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* and *The Golden Legend*, relate that Mary was buried in the Garden of Gethsemane (Maas 471; De Voragine 2: 92). In a long quote from John of Damascus, *The Golden Legend* explains why this would be appropriate, contrasting the death that came from Eve's disobedience with the life that comes from Mary's obedience:

Of old, God expelled and exiled from paradise the first parents of the human race, asleep in the death of sin, already buried under a mountain of disobedience, already rotting in the drunkenness of sin: now, conversely, this woman, who brought life to the whole human race, who manifested obedience to God the Father, who rooted out all passion . . . how could paradise not welcome her? Eve lent her ear to the serpent, drank the poisonous draft, was entrapped by pleasures, subjected to the pangs of childbirth, and condemned with Adam. But this truly blessed woman, who bent her ear to God, whom the Holy Spirit filled, who bore the Father's mercy in her womb, who conceived without contact with a

husband and gave birth without pain, how shall death swallow her, how shall corruption dare to do anything to the body that bore life itself? (De Voragine 2: 93–94)

Mary's obedience "brought life to the whole human race" and prepared the way for Christ's act of obedience in Gethsemane that would enable her own body to escape corruption. Now, following these examples, Cather's priests seek to bring life to this desert place by submitting to God's administration of his household.

Cather portrays the priests' ecclesial work as analogous to Latour's careful gardening. This activity comes to represent the joining of different cultures and species in flourishing ecological communities; as Mary's obedience brought the whole human race into God's family through the Incarnation, so the priests' obedience reconciles the disparate members of the desert Southwest into a restored, Edenic community. In the Incarnation, Jesus unites the human and the divine, reuniting the material and spiritual unity that had been fragmented by the fall. Martínez's justification for his lust—"it is better not to go against nature" (*DCA* 153)—seeks to keep these categories separate in order to legitimate his desire to live according to ungraced nature; in Martínez's view, nature and grace, matter and spirit remain opposed. Latour, however, recognizes that the Incarnation reconciles these categories. Thus Mary can lead him and his animals to *Agua Secreta* "with Nature" because the Incarnation restores God's relation to his material creation. Latour's garden likewise embodies this restored harmony as its life mingles spirit and matter: "The air and the earth interpenetrated in the warm gusts of spring; the soil was full of sunlight, and the sunlight full of red dust. The air one breathed was saturated with earthy smells, and the grass underfoot had a reflection of blue sky in it" (*DCA* 209). The earth and plants are filled with wind and breath in a way that suggests a

divine presence. Throughout the Bible, wind and the Holy Spirit are linked: Hebrew and Greek use one word for wind and spirit, and Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit in terms of a wild wind in his conversation with Nicodemus (Jn. 3.8). Cather's description of Latour's garden, then, unites the physical and spiritual; this cultivated nature is graced with the divine presence.

Latour's Marian gardening makes possible this incarnational reconciliation. He includes both indigenous and imported plants, and his inclusive gardening signals his submission to God's great household and his desire to love and learn from all its members. Along the south wall of the garden was a row of "old, old tamarisks, with twisted trunks." These trees had been neglected, but they remained "miraculously endowed with the power to burst into delicate foliage and flowers, to cover themselves with long brooms of lavender-pink flowers" (*DCA* 210). Vaillant loves these trees because they form an integral part of the Mexican community:

wherever he had come upon a Mexican homestead . . . the tamarisk waved its feathery plums of bluish green. The family burro was tied to its trunk, the chickens scratched under it, the dogs slept in its shade, the washing was hung on its branches. . . . Father Joseph . . . loved it . . . because it was the tree of the people, and was like one of the family in every Mexican household. (*DCA* 210–11)

Cather's description of this tree seems to imply that it is native to the desert southwest, but as John Murphy points out, it actually, like Christianity, is native to the Middle East and was transplanted in America (*DCA* 468–469). The Mexican acceptance of the tamarisk tree seems to symbolize the successful ecological and cultural reconciliation toward which Latour works. The tamarisk tree now anchors the Mexican family and maintains a significant place in Latour's garden, and alongside this row of old trees he planted fruit trees from St. Louis, lotus flowers that he brought from Rome, and many

vegetables. The presences of lotus flowers and tamarisk trees—plants that serve little practical purpose—indicate that Latour does not cultivate his garden only to have fine foreign ingredients to add to his own diet. That was the selfish purpose of Fray Baltazar’s enclosed garden at Ácoma. Rather than imposing a new order that serves himself, Bishop Latour cultivates an inclusive, “great” diocese in which plants and people from various places can flourish together.<sup>40</sup>

This inclusive garden brings restorative benefits to the surrounding human communities, whether Protestant or Catholic, European or Mexican. Significantly, the origin of some of Latour’s imported fruit trees implicitly links them to Mary, the one whose submission to God’s will ushered in the Incarnation and brought redemption to all of creation. The fruit trees in his garden came to Santa Fé from St. Louis in the same wagons as the “blessed Sisters of Loretto, who came to found the Academy of Our Lady of Light” (*DCA* 209). And both these nuns and the fruit trees now benefit all those in the surrounding area: “The school [founded by the nuns] was now well established, reckoned a benefit to the community by Protestants as well as Catholics, and the trees were bearing. Cuttings from them were already yielding fruit in many Mexican gardens” (*DCA* 209). Cather’s syntax here mingles the spiritual fruit of the Marian nuns with the literal fruit from these trees; their spiritual and physical blessings intermix like the air and the earth within the garden. Later, Cather makes the physical benefits of these trees even more explicit when she describes Latour’s holistic approach to training new missionaries: “He urged the new priests to plant fruit trees wherever they went, and to encourage the

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<sup>40</sup> Certainly the Columbian exchange wreaked havoc with existing ecologies, but Latour’s gardening recognizes that humans have always influenced biotic communities. Rather than trying to return to a supposedly “pure” past, Latour cultivates a harmony among the current species in his garden.



Mexicans to add fruit to their starchy diet. Wherever there was a French priest, there should be a garden of fruit trees and vegetables and flowers. He often quoted to his students that passage from their fellow Auvergnat, Pascal: that Man was lost and saved in a garden” (*DCA* 278–79). Latour instructs these young priests to bring health, both spiritual and physical, to those whom they serve; the standard for this gardening is the health of the community, not their own desires or economic success. Only then will their work participate in the redemption that began in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus submitted to his Father, atoned for the Edenic fall, and made it possible for creation to once again be part of God’s family.

The paradoxical miracle of Latour’s gardening is that it re-creates him. While he cultivates and fosters various plants, and through them other people, his own life is also reshaped. This paradox parallels the Marian mystery that her assent to Gabriel results in her giving birth to the one who would then give her spiritual life. It is this mystery that drives the meditation on Mary in *The Golden Legend* and that seems to inspire Cather’s way of imagining Latour’s gardening. Latour’s dedicated work in his garden, Cather writes, is “his only recreation” (*DCA* 209). Of course, this means on one level that it is his only pastime, his only activity besides his work as the Bishop. But Cather uses this specific word elsewhere—“Father Latour’s recreation was his garden” (*DCA* 278)—and such deliberate use of this suggestive term indicates that Cather means the word also in its etymological sense of re-creation. Like Mary, whose obedient submission to God’s will saved her and all those who likewise followed her Son, so Latour’s work of obedient gardening not only brings life and health to the plants he cultivates and the people who eat this fruit—his gardening also brings new life to himself.

The particular, submissive character of Latour's re-creation becomes clearer in comparison to the attitude toward missionary work that Father Vaillant expresses in this garden scene. Vaillant has learned to apply the principles of Latour's obedient, Marian gardening to the propagation of the Catholic faith. He has devoted his life to serving her; his motto is "*Auspice, Maria!*" meaning "with Mary as helper," and Mary has indeed protected and led him (*DCA* 297). His personal attachment to Mary has made him eager to bear, like her, the redeemer to all people. He tells Latour that he longs to be well so that he can travel again to "hunt for lost Catholics" (*DCA* 215). Vaillant explains that these people are so hungry for teaching and the sacraments that they "are like seeds, full of germination but with no moisture. A mere contact is enough to make them a living part of the church" (*DCA* 215). Vaillant knows that he cannot create fruitful harmony himself, but like Latour's patient cultivation of seeds, Vaillant relishes opportunities to "set free those souls in bondage"; he longs simply to participate in the work that God has already been doing in his household (*DCA* 217). Vaillant's "greatest happiness" now is "restor[ing] these lost children to God." As he exclaims to Latour, "I have almost become a Mexican! I have learned to like *chili colorado* and mutton fat. Their foolish ways no longer offend me, their very faults are dear to me. I am *their man!*" (*DCA* 217). This is the priest who, if it had not been for Latour's urging, would never have worked up the courage to leave his home in France (*DCA* 299–300). This is the priest who wanted to spend his life in contemplation of the Virgin Mary (*DCA* 43). This is the priest who at the beginning of the book cooked his own meat when he traveled to Mexican families because he couldn't stand their methods of food preparation (*DCA* 60). Vaillant has renounced his own desires for contemplation and fine French food and has been recreated

into a loving servant of the inhabitants of the desert southwest. His selfless service demonstrates his passion for participating in God's redemptive administration of his household, even if that means that Vaillant will have to deny his own desires.

Latour has had many opportunities to learn that Marian obedience leads to fruitful community and personal re-creation—when he knelt before the cruciform tree, when he listened to the Angelus bell, when he traveled with Jacinto, when he worked in his garden—but he still seems unable to practice submission in all areas of his life. Unlike Vaillant, Latour struggles to let his personal desires go, to not run his diocese for himself but instead to submit to God's great ordering of his household. The Bishop was looking forward to having his childhood friend Vaillant stay with him in Santa Fé this year; he missed him when he was away in the remote Mexican villages. But Vaillant's "impassioned request [to hunt for lost Catholics] had spoiled a cherished plan, and brought Father Latour a bitter personal disappointment." As he walks through his garden trying to decide how to respond to Vaillant's desire to return to the Mexican villages, Latour concludes, "[t]here was but one thing to do,—and before he reached the tamarisks he had done it. He broke off a spray of the dry lilac-coloured flowers to punctuate and seal, as it were, his renunciation" (*DCA* 218). Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Latour must say to God, "thy will be done."

Latour allows Vaillant to leave that summer after he regains his health, but in the subsequent winter, Latour feels lonely and spiritually barren. Latour learns from a poor, illiterate Mexican woman, however, the joy Vaillant finds in serving in God's household. Initially, Latour's submission to God's will in allowing Vaillant to leave causes him to feel the loneliness that Christ experiences in Gethsemane, the loneliness Latour also

experienced when he thought that he might die of thirst in the desert at the beginning of the book. One December evening, as Latour tries to sleep, he is overcome with a sense of the solitude and futility of his work: the Mexicans and Indians remain unchanged, the “great diocese was still a heathen country.” Cather explicitly links Latour’s sufferings here with Christ’s: “the bed on which the Bishop lay became a bed of thorns” (*DCA* 221). Latour rises from this painful bed and goes into the church to pray, but he is surprised to find a poor Mexican woman standing outside the church door, weeping. This woman, Sada, works for a Protestant family who has prohibited her from attending Mass for the past nineteen years, but tonight she had grown desperate enough to slip out and try to enter the church. Latour takes her inside to the “Lady Chapel” where they pray together to Mary. Cather only records the first line of the prayer, “O Holy Mary, Queen of Virgins. . . .,” but this opening line corresponds to a prayer often prayed when meditating on the first Joyful Mystery of the Rosary, the Incarnation:<sup>41</sup>

O Holy Mary, Queen of Virgins; through the most high Mystery of the Incarnation of thy beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, wherein our salvation was begun, obtain for us, through thy most holy intercession, light to understand the greatness of the benefit he hath bestowed upon us, in vouchsafing to become our Brother, and giving thee, his own beloved Mother, to be our Mother also. Amen. (*Golden Manual* 135)

This prayer expresses gratitude for the great reconciliation accomplished by the Incarnation: fallen humans can once again be members of the family of God. It is the realization that the Theotokos, the mother of God, is also the mother of every Christian that enables Latour to find peace and joy in his lonely toil.

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<sup>41</sup> In his explanatory notes, Murphy attributes this quotation to a different source: “These invocations are selected from the Litany (prayer consisting of invocations with fixed responses) of the Blessed Virgin but are not in sequence” (*DCA* 474). However, Cather seems to quote the first line of this prayer, one that was common in prayer books that included the Rosary. This prayer, then, seems the more likely source.

Cather's description in this scene figures Latour as a Marian figure who accepts others, and is accepted himself, into the family of God. Her use of his full name—which includes both Mary and John, the disciple who was made her adopted son (Jn. 19.26–27)—signals this identification: “Not often, indeed, had Jean Marie Latour come so near to the Fountain of all Pity as in the Lady Chapel that night; the pity that no man born of woman could ever utterly cut himself off from . . . The beautiful concept of Mary pierced the priest's heart like a sword” (*DCA* 228). Latour experiences the divine compassion embodied in Mary, the “Kind Woman in Heaven” who welcomes all, even a “bond-woman” like Sada, into the holy family.<sup>42</sup> The image Cather uses for Latour's realization, that of a sword piercing his heart, is the image Simeon used when he prophesied to Mary that her love for her son would cause her anguish (Lk. 2:35). Through both his name and this image, Cather links Latour with Mary as one who, even as he is brought into the family of God, extends this Marian welcome to Sada and others. As he earlier participated in Christ's sufferings, now he participates in Mary's, and like both, he submits to his role as a welcoming servant in God's house. As Latour realizes after this experience, “This church was Sada's house, and he was a servant in it” (*DCA* 229). Like Vaillant, he finds peace and joy in serving in God's family. As he steps out of the church onto a fresh carpet of snow, Latour looks up at the “Sangre de Cristo mountains”: “The peace without seemed all one with the peace in his own soul” (*DCA*

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<sup>42</sup> Like the goats that Latour saw in *Agua Secreta*, the biblical bond-woman represents those who are not redeemed. Yet Latour sees both the goats and the bond-woman as members of the redeemed children of God.

230).<sup>43</sup> The peace he finds in his priestly work depends on this blood of Christ that accomplished the reconciliation he now tries both to receive and extend to others.

Yet even after his experience of peace and family unity with Sada in Mary's chapel, Latour still feels lonely when his childhood friend is absent. As he admits to himself the following spring while visiting a Navajo village where his friend, Eusabio, lives, "he missed Father Vaillant's companionship" (*DCA* 235). Latour succumbs to his loneliness and writes a letter recalling Vaillant to Santa Fé. As he confesses later, "I used my authority as a Bishop to gratify my personal wish" (*DCA* 265). After sending this letter, Latour travels back to Santa Fé with Eusabio, and on this journey he learns important lessons in ecological humility and courtesy from Eusabio. Ever since Latour bowed before the cruciform tree and practiced a "courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing," he has been learning to practice this posture more consistently (*DCA* 18). This courtesy is proper for one who serves in God's great household, and Latour applies it in his relations to the Indians and Mexicans and in his gardening even while he still struggles to surrender his desire for Vaillant's companionship and allow him to serve where he is most needed.

As he travels back to Santa Fé with Eusabio, however, Latour sees the way Eusabio embodies a humble courtesy in all his relations, and this prepares Latour to eventually allow Vaillant to depart. Eusabio evinces a remarkable wonder for all the life that surrounds him. One morning he came into their camp with a cluster of "rainbow

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<sup>43</sup> Pam Fox Kuhlken provides an extended analysis of the appearances of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. She argues convincingly that "[t]he novel represents *sangre de Cristo* as a fact, as the ubiquitous undercurrent of existence. The land, like our nature, may have fallen, yet it has not been conquered but redeemed" (367).

flower[s]” to show Latour their delicate beauty (*DCA* 246). Eusabio’s delight in the lives around him leads him to fit himself into the natural order that fosters such exquisite beauty. The Bishop notes the way that Eusabio carefully “obliterate[s] every trace” of their camp before they leave: “Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man’s way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little . . . , it was the Indian’s way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air” (*DCA* 246). Because Eusabio finds the desert landscape already good, he “seemed to have none of the European’s desire to ‘master’ nature, to arrange and re-create” (*DCA* 247). Like Ivar in *O Pioneers!*, Eusabio seems to live like an animal, which in Cather’s descriptions appears noble and yet too passive. On the one hand, Eusabio’s way of life does not cause the destruction or harm that the selfish, authoritarian attitude of many settlers caused, people like Wick Cutter. This damage is analogous to the damage Martínez and Lucero inflict on their communities through their love of personal authority. In contrast to this approach, Eusabio’s community treats “the land and all that it bore . . . with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it” (*DCA* 247). On the other hand, Eusabio’s animal-like relation to his ecological community suffers from the same weakness that Ivar’s attitude did: it doesn’t desecrate the land but it doesn’t prevent or undo its desecration by others.

Latour’s gardening and Vaillant’s propagation of the Catholic faith clearly go further than this almost passive way of “vanish[ing] into the landscape” (*DCA* 246). Like the Mexican community in Arroyo Hondo, they participate in an ordering and arranging that does not merely serve their own interests but rather brings life to the entire ecological

community. What makes Latour's gardening so different from the extractive farming of other Europeans is that he only "arrange[s] and re-create[s]" the ecological community after he himself has been "re-creat[ed]" by his place. The humble respect that Eusabio demonstrates toward other creatures emphasizes for Latour the need to subordinate his own arranging and ordering—whether in his garden or in his diocese—to the great, divine order that God is working out in his household.

Latour's time with Eusabio, then, prepares him to submit to God's order in the area where it is most difficult for him. Shortly after Vaillant returns to Santa Fé, Latour receives a letter from a fellow Bishop asking him to send a priest to the mining camps springing up in Colorado. Vaillant, wondering why Latour has called him back from his fruitful ministry in the Mexican villages, sees this letter as a sign from God and jumps at the chance to spread the faith in such harsh, difficult conditions. As a missionary, "it was the discipline of his life to break ties; to say farewell and move on into the unknown" (*DCA* 260). Latour, though, is torn: "As a Bishop, he could only approve Father Vaillant's eagerness to be gone. . . . But as a man, he was a little hurt that his old comrade should leave him without one regret" (*DCA* 263). After seeing Vaillant off on his new adventure, Latour returns to his house, lonely and discouraged. And yet as he walks through his door,

he seemed to come back to reality. . . . [T]hat feeling of personal loneliness was gone, and a sense of loss was replaced by a sense of restoration. . . . It was just this solitariness of love in which a priest's life could be like his Master's. It was not a solitude of atrophy, of negation, but of perpetual flowering. A life need not be cold, or devoid of grace in the worldly sense, if it were filled by Her who was all the graces; Virgin-daughter, Virgin-mother, girl of the people and Queen of Heaven" (*DCA* 268).



As Latour continues to meditate on Mary and the miraculous “perpetual flowering” that she brings, he comes to understand her paradoxical place in God’s family: she is both daughter and mother, both “girl of the people” and “Queen of Heaven,” the “image of a goddess” who is yet “a woman” (*DCA* 270). Mary’s dual role in the divine family models for Latour the role he must learn to occupy. Like Mary, he is charged with bearing the Incarnational redemption that redeems him. This intimate participation in God’s family is difficult to achieve, but it gives him the opportunity to chart a middle course between those who would be more passive members of their ecological communities—like Ivar or Eusabio—and those who would shape their communities to serve their own desires—like Cutter or Martínez.

Latour’s intimate attachment to the desert community leads him to spend the last years of his life there, even after he retires and could return to his homeland. He continues to garden and to train the new French priests in the local cultures and in horticulture. He also expands his gardening efforts by “domesticat[ing] and develop[ing] the native wild flowers”:

He had one hill-side solidly clad with that low-growing purple verbena which mats over the hills of New Mexico. It was like a great violet velvet mantle thrown down in the sun; all the shades that the dyers and weavers of Italy and France strove for through centuries, the violet that is full of rose colour and is yet not lavender; the blue that becomes almost pink and then retreats again into sea-dark purple—the true Episcopal colour and countless variations of it. (*DCA* 279)

This deep violet that Latour cultivates is used in Catholic services, according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, during both the Advent and Easter seasons: times of preparation for the Incarnation and the Passion. It symbolizes the “penitential character” that marks these seasons (Morrisroe). And yet Cather’s rich description of the “sea-dark purple”

also connotes royalty; the sacrifice and renunciation that Catholics practice during these seasons prepare them to participate in Christ's rule. This color, then, combines the dual roles filled by Mary and now Latour; they practice penitent sacrifice and benevolent rule because they are both redeemed and the bearers of redemption. Latour has learned this variegated, redeeming shade from these native wild flowers—they have taught him the shade of penitence—and he now cultivates and spreads this color.

The fact that these flowers are wild reminds Latour that God's household is governed by wild, unearned grace. The work of participating in this grace can sometimes cause humans to think that they are the source of reconciliation or redemption. Latour feels tired and older when he visits France, but here in the New World desert, he is reminded that life remains wild and ordered by grace. In a place weighted and ordered by centuries of human work, the wild life that undergirds culture can be obscured. We do not see that the native, wild tree has grown into the shape of the cross, we do not finger the lilac blooms of the tamarisk tree, we do not marvel at the delicate blossoms of the rainbow flower. In the "[l]ight-hearted mornings of the desert," however, Latour more easily senses the "[s]omething soft and wild and free" that "softly, softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning!" (*DCA* 287–88). This gracious wildness frees Latour to participate in the glorious redemption of the Incarnation, by which the Spirit—who, as Jesus tells Nicodemus, is wild and uncontrollable like the wind—reunites fallen creation into the family of God. In all his work of tending his garden and his diocese, Latour remembers that the propagation of seeds comes from God, from the wild, and that his work does not cause but only participates in this wild redemption. As Paul writes

about his propagation of the Christian faith, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3.6). So even though Latour “arranged an order for his last days,” he makes his order participatory in the order of God’s wild family (*DCA* 288).

One of the stories from the early planting of the church that Latour heard when he first arrived and that encouraged him in his old age illustrates the gratuitous, miraculous way in which God welcomes all into his immediate family. Two Spanish priests had been traveling through the desert and were beginning to worry that they would perish of thirst when they came upon a small house. A Mexican shepherd and his wife and small boy lived here and gave them hospitality for the night. They prayed together, and the small boy made the sign of the cross over the Spanish priests before they went to sleep. The next day, after the priests arrived at their destination, they were told no such family lived in the desert through which they had come, and when they went back with a guide to investigate, they found no house or sign of anyone. The priests concluded that they had been miraculously entertained by the Holy Family and thanked God for his care for them. Latour cherishes “the belief that They, after so many centuries of history and glory, should return to play Their first parts, in the persons of a humble Mexican family, the lowliest of the lowly, the poorest of the poor,—in a wilderness at the end of the world” (*DCA* 296). This appearance of the Holy Family, like the Virgin of Guadalupe, demonstrates to Latour God’s desire to reconcile all creation, even this desert wilderness, into his family. And through the names she gives her priests—Joseph Vaillant and Jean Marie Latour—Cather suggests that they are another instantiation of the Holy Family in

this desert place.<sup>44</sup> They are men who have been reconciled into God's family and who now devote their lives to extending this reconciliation.

Yet as Cather illustrates throughout her legend, individuals must renounce their desires and wills in order to enter fully into this holy family. By connecting Latour's last hours to Christ's agony in Gethsemane, Cather again suggests that Latour's participation in Christ's renunciation and suffering is what enables him to also participate in bearing Christ's redemption to his community. As Latour slowly dies, his friends gather around "to watch and pray" as Christ commanded his disciples to do in Gethsemane (*DCA* 314). In his final minutes, Latour begins to "murmur" in French about the turning point in his and Vaillant's lives when they left their families and homes to embark on their missionary work. Latour remembered standing with Vaillant, "trying to give consolation to a young man who was being torn in two before his eyes by the desire to go and the necessity to stay. He was trying to forge a new Will in that devout and exhausted priest" (*DCA* 315). Vaillant cannot imagine leaving his family, but in forging this "new Will" in him, Latour helps Vaillant make God's desire and will his own. As Christ concludes his thrice-repeated Gethsemane prayer, "nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk. 22.42). Not surprisingly, given how Pascal's meditations on this garden have formed Cather's imagination, Pascal identifies this renunciation of family as one of the ways in which we must follow Christ's example: "Jésus s'arrache d'avec ses disciples pour entrer dans l'agonie; il faut s'arracher de ses plus proches et des plus intimes pour l'imiter"

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<sup>44</sup> Critics like Ted Warner have wondered why Cather changes some of her historical figures' names (266). Her desire to emphasize the role of the Holy Family and Mary in particular may be one reason that she altered Jean-Baptiste Lamy's name to include "Marie."

(368).<sup>45</sup> This is how the Holy Family can be so inclusive; by renouncing the priorities of personal ties and desires, Christ and those who imitate him can offer redemptive love to all.

Cather takes great care, then, to figure Latour's death as participating not only in Christ's renunciation, but also in his reconciliation. In the book's penultimate section, Latour recollects the sad history of the Navajos' mistreatment in his diocese and expresses his great joy that they were eventually restored to their homeland, their "Indian Garden of Eden" (*DCA* 313). As the Bishop tells a friend, "I have lived to see two great wrongs righted; I have seen the end of black slavery, and I have seen the Navajos restored to their own country" (*DCA* 306). His concern for justice and cross-cultural reconciliation is perfectly expressed in the final paragraph of the book:

When the Cathedral bell tolled just after dark, the Mexican population of Santa Fé fell upon their knees, and all American Catholics as well. Many others who did not kneel prayed in their hearts. Eusabio and the Tesuque boys went quietly away to tell their people; and the next morning the old Archbishop lay before the high altar in the church he had built. (*DCA* 315)

The Moorish bell that the Bishop first heard ringing the Angelus to announce the advent of the Incarnation now tolls for his own death. This bell symbolizes the way Christianity unites diverse cultures in beautiful harmony, and this unity is possible only because, as the Angelus concludes, God "dwelt among us" and welcomed the world back into his family. This is why the Bishop's death, like Jesus', reconciles people from different religions and cultures: Mexicans, Americans, Indians, Catholics and those "who did not kneel" are all joined in their mourning for the death of the Archbishop. His body now fittingly lies in the place where Christ's sacrifice is celebrated each day. The bishop gave

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<sup>45</sup> "Jesus tears Himself away from His disciples to enter upon His agony; we must tear ourselves from our nearest and dearest after His example" (369).

his life and death to restore every member of his community to their place in God's great household.

Cather's legend, following the medieval Christian paradigm, measures all actions against the one great standard of Christ, his birth, life, death, and resurrection. This implies that in a post-Edenic world, a place where each individual is tempted to act as his or her own authority, Christ's model of self-sacrifice and divine reconciliation provides the only way to restore the harmonious ecological community that flourished before the human fall. Cather's priests become free not when, like Martínez, they seek their own desires, but rather when they submit to this divine drama. By renouncing the temptation to be their own authorities and to pronounce good and evil for themselves, Latour and Vaillant are enabled to participate in bearing the redemption brought by the Incarnation. While Mather's designation of the New World wilderness as "the *Devil's Territories*" freed the colonists to reorder it as they saw fit, Cather's portrayal of humans participating in a restored ecology includes communal checks to correct self-serving individuals. America will only look like Eden, Cather suggests, if Americans follow the way of renunciation exemplified by Mary and Jesus, if they take up their crosses daily and participate in Jesus' death and resurrection. Thus the ecological ethic imagined in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is one of radical self-surrender and even more radical hope, hope that God is indeed at work restoring his familial order in his world.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### “The Way of Love”: Berry’s Vision of Work in the Kingdom of God

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

—Berry, “Health” 89

In the aftermath of two World Wars and the destruction caused by the industrialization of American agriculture, hope that God is restoring his order in creation may be hard to come by. But as Wendell Berry explains in a recent interview, “Hope is a virtue and that means you’re supposed to have it. You’ve got to go hunt for the reasons, and I know that within limits, people can change. . . I know that people can do good work” (“Hunting” 222). Much of Berry’s writing represents the fruit of his search for reasons to hope, which as he indicates is based on the belief that people can change and that they can do good work even in damaged places.

The protagonist of Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow* (2000) is one such example of a man who slowly matures and eventually learns how to love and work. Jayber plans to be a preacher until he has a sudden realization while attending seminary that causes him to reevaluate his career:

[I]t hit me that Jesus’ own most fervent prayer was refused: ‘Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.’ . . . It just knocked me in the head. *This*, I thought, is what is meant by ‘thy will be done’ in the Lord’s Prayer, which I had prayed

time and again without thinking about it. It means that your will and God's will may not be the same. (*JC* 51)<sup>1</sup>

Jayber's troubling deduction causes him to wonder what the point of prayer is: if God's will is going to happen regardless of what we want, why bother asking? When he questions one of his professors about this, his professor offers little to reassure him: "You have been given questions to which you cannot be *given* answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time" (*JC* 54). Jayber leaves seminary and does not pray again for twenty years. Only by returning to his geographical home and becoming a member of that community does Jayber begin to understand the hard teaching about prayer that Jesus modeled in Gethsemane. And as his professor told him, Jayber never receives a simple answer to his question but rather learns to live out "a way of love"—modeled in many ways on Dante's love for Beatrice—that enables him to relinquish his selfish view of prayer and submit his will to the will of God. By traveling this way of love, Jayber's youthful, rather selfish love is formed by his tradition, his community, and his faithful work as Port William's barber until it grows into a faithful, mature love.

Berry is a fitting author with whom to conclude this study of religion and ecological ethics in American literature because his imaginative vision incorporates many of the insights articulated by previous authors. Like Thoreau, Berry is troubled by the history of Christianity in America and yet remains convinced that the Biblical narrative contains wisdom that can help us live in ways that serve the ecological health of our places. Thoreau challenged his readers to consider what the chief end of man might be by relentlessly critiquing his neighbors' means of life and by experimenting with ways to actually enjoy God's works. Berry too asks the question "What are People For?," and in

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<sup>1</sup> Jayber quotes here from Luke 22.42.



the essay with this title, he follows Thoreau's approach by critiquing our means of life. Our addiction to labor-saving technology implies that humans were not made to do meaningful work but rather to act as units of consumption in a global, automated economy ("What" 125). If instead we are all valuable and beloved members of God's creation, Berry argues, we should return to the "inescapably necessary work of restoring and caring for our farms, forests, and rural towns and communities" ("What" 125); this nurturing work is a more appropriate way of living out our love for particular people and places. Berry's rich understanding of caring work, then, follows Thoreau's expansive definition of "enjoy" in breaking down dualisms inherited from the Puritans that confuse the relationship between spiritual ends and physical means.

Berry justifies his high view of work by his belief that God's creation operates according to divine love: "I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love" ("Health" 89). Like Muir, who found the "wonders of Redeeming Love" in creation's beauty (*Kindred* 34), Berry sees God's love within the wild, mysterious order of the natural world, an order he calls "the Kingdom of God" ("Two Economies" 54-55). Muir would certainly agree with Berry's declaration that "[God] is the wildest being in existence" and that he retains absolute authority over his creation: "we humans do not own the world or any part of it" ("Christianity" 101, 96). But while Muir focused on getting humans baptized into this wild order, Berry emphasizes the need for humans to occupy their proper place within this order of love so that they do not disrupt it but rather contribute to the "abundant life" that God's Kingdom offers to all its members ("Burden" 133). Muir does imply in his Hetch-Hetchy articles

that humans reenact the Edenic fall when they disregard God's moral restrictions and make themselves the arbiters of good and evil, and a similar understanding of Eden led Cather to see her priests as imitators of Jesus' submissive posture in Gethsemane. As indicated by the passage from *Jayber Crow* quoted above, Berry likewise sees Gethsemane, with its emphasis on submission and on attentively watching and praying, as a remedy for the dislocation and destruction that began in Eden and a means by which we can reenter the loving order of the Kingdom of God.

Yet Jayber's seminary professor articulated a crucial insight that Berry finds in the story of Jesus' unanswered, agonized cry; rather than looking for easy answers, we need to cultivate the disciplines that will enable us to participate in God's redemption. Thus Berry claims that "Hope lives in the means, not the end" and devotes much of his writing to articulating the cultural forms and practices that prepare the way for redemption ("Discipline" 131). Cather's priests who garden faithfully in the hope of participating in the Incarnation's reconciliation, then, are like Berry's exemplary farmer who "has prepared a way / for his life to come to him, if it will" (*Collected Poems* 114). As Jayber realized, our will and God's will may not be the same, and as the "wildest being in existence," God's will won't always be understandable to humans, but by faithfully watching and praying, humans may be able to align their lives with God's redemptive processes. In his essays, fiction, and poetry, Berry devotes himself to articulating what kinds of good work might allow people to participate in the abundant life of the Kingdom of God.

Berry's writings return to these same themes again and again, looking at them from different angles and working them out in different contexts. He has thus generated

a remarkably unified and complex body of work. And Berry has made approaching this body a daunting task by the warning he gives in the prefatory notice to *Jayber Crow* that “persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise ‘understand’ it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers.” Instead of trying to explain or analyze Berry’s thought, then, readers should attempt to follow the lesson that Berry himself draws from Mark Twain’s similar notice in *Huckleberry Finn*: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.” Berry does not think that such a notice forbids criticism, but that it warns against “critical reductionism”: “Mark Twain’s point, I think, is not that his book had no motive or moral or plot, but rather that its motive, its moral, and its plot were peculiar to itself as a whole, and could be conveyed only by itself as a whole” (*Life* 116). The goal of the following study, then, is to consider Berry’s work as a whole and not to mine it for particular ethical principles or insights to extract.<sup>2</sup>

To do so, this chapter will first explore some of the key ideas in Berry’s essays, particularly his understanding of the troubled history of European settlement in America, the Christian tradition, the economy or order of the Kingdom of God, the human place within this economy, and the faithful, particular, imaginative work required to care for this place. Berry’s novels about the Port William community provide a rich, fully imagined articulation of the way of life he calls for in his essays, and so they help put flesh on his ideas—not merely to explain them, but to learn from them. Reading *Jayber*

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<sup>2</sup> Fritz Oehlschlaeger, in his recent book *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*, expresses a similar goal when he proposes to study Berry’s thought “with an eye toward learning from it, not simply about it” (3).

*Crow* in order to learn from it reveals a Dantean way of love that directs Jayber to his proper place. This way of love involves both imagining how to serve one's beloved and then correcting an inadequate, immature imagination through faithful work. One of Berry's earlier novels, *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974), provides a more concrete portrayal of this good work, which depends on love and mediates between imagination and the particulars of one's place. Over the course of his long life, Jack, through failures and trials, learns the difficult work that love requires. Berry's characters who remain in their places participate in God's abundant life through their physical labor, and so they shatter the dualisms that plagued the Puritans as they attempted to settle the New World for God's glory. Yet in many ways Berry's vision fulfills the Puritans' desire to establish an authentic community that would faithfully embody God's kingdom.

#### *Caring for God's Abundant Life*

Over many decades, Wendell Berry has written an impressive body of careful, penetrating essays in which he explores how religious beliefs and cultural practices shape our relationships with our places and the other beings who live there. Berry thus has much to say about the traditions in which he lives and writes, and in many respects, he is quite critical of these traditions. According to Berry, America's history has been dominated by exploiters whose dualistic mindset has led them to destroy the earth in the pursuit of heaven, often imagined as an afterlife for the disembodied soul. And yet running alongside this history of conquest are people who care for their places and communities. Berry draws on Wallace Stegner's terms for these two American attitudes: the "boomers" and the "stickers." The "boomers" dreamed the "frontier dream of easy wealth and easy escape" while the "stickers" dreamed of "a settled, independent, frugal

life on a small freehold” (“Conservation” 67, 69). Elsewhere, in his seminal book *The Unsettling of America*, Berry uses the terms “exploiter” and “nurturer” to describe this same split. Berry differentiates between these two types with some care:

I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. . . . The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter’s goal is money, profit; the nurturer’s goal is health—his land’s health, his own, his family’s, his community’s, his country’s. . . . The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work *as well* as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. (*Unsettling* 7–8)

Berry’s description may seem rather simplistic, and yet, as he is careful to point out, these terms do not describe two discrete groups of people as much as they “describe a division . . . within persons” (7). We are all implicated in an exploitative, industrial society, and we may nurture some places while exploiting others. This damaging, conflicted tradition troubles Berry, and his writing aims to help us envision ways to leave our exploitative past behind us and to become a more deeply nurturing people.<sup>3</sup>

One of the causes that Berry identifies for our history of exploitation is the dualistic form of Christianity that predominates in America. At the root of much “respectable Christian behavior” (“Christianity” 95), Berry finds a “dualism of body and soul” that manifests itself in a deep division “between Creator and creature, spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work . . . This dualism, I think, is the most destructive disease that afflicts us” (“Christianity” 105). It is a disease

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<sup>3</sup> In “A Native Hill” Berry writes at length about coming to accept his vocation to live in the place he was born and to write and farm in response to the painful, complex past that has damaged this place (“Native” 179).

not only because the Bible instructs us that our souls are themselves formed of dust and God's breath—Berry provides a careful reading of Genesis 2:7 to understand its profound rejection of a body/soul dualism (“Christianity” 105–08)—but also because this false dualism leads us to deny the ecological insight that we are interconnected with the rest of creation: “While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures” (*Unsettling* 97). Modern Christianity, then, by “denying the holiness of the body,” commits “blasphemy” against God's good work of creation (“Christianity” 113, 104).

One might conclude from Berry's strenuous critique of Christian dualism and its complicity in the exploitation of American land that he would turn elsewhere in search of a more nurturing religious vision. But Berry remains within the Christian tradition for two reasons. The first is that he believes he has nowhere else to turn: “The new must come from the old, for where else would you get it?” (*Life* 71). Like Thoreau, who wrote that sometimes “a lost man” needs to have “sense enough to trace back his own tracks in the snow” (*HMJ* 7: 109), Berry holds that the best way to find where we are now, and to consider where we should go, is to first understand where we have been: “Human hope may always have resided in our ability, in time of need, to return to our cultural landmarks and reorient ourselves” (*Life* 3). This reorientation does not involve simply accepting the past, but requires the hard work of “judg[ing] and correct[ing]” it (“Poetry and Marriage” 102). In Berry's case, this involves understanding his Christian heritage. Because Christianity is his “native tradition,” turning “away from it or against it . . . [would] only bind [me] tightly to a reduced version of it” (“Christianity” 95–96). So while Berry gratefully acknowledges the other traditions he has learned from, particularly

Buddhism, he argues that rather than look for greener pastures in a different tradition, “[a] better possibility” for those born into the Christian tradition “is that this, our native religion, should survive and renew itself so that it may become as largely and truly instructive as we need it to be” (“Christianity” 96). Rather than betray his place in this lineage or traduce the wisdom it hands down, Berry strives to translate carefully his tradition to meet the present needs of his own context. The fact that these words—“betray,” “traduce,” “translate,” “tradition”—all come from the same root indicates the anxiety our language encodes regarding how properly to hand over cultural wisdom from one generation to the next.<sup>4</sup> As Kimberly Smith explains, Berry’s “goal, then, is to *revive and renew* the intellectual traditions he has inherited” (6). Many Americans treat their tradition like they treat the earth: they extract what resources they can easily get from it and then move on. Berry’s decision to tend and care for his tradition, one that has been abused and misused, parallels his decision to nurture a “marginal” farm whose previous owners exploited and damaged it (“Making” 335).<sup>5</sup>

By not turning from his tradition, Berry models the humble view of the individual necessary for healthy community. Several critics have noted this in reference to one of Berry’s early novels, *Remembering* (1988). Dominic Manganiello examines this novel’s intertextuality to conclude that Berry decenters the epistemic sufficiency of the individual human mind through his allusions to other works of literature (115). Other critics grasp

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<sup>4</sup> Berry expresses little affinity for modern theories of influence, preferring to look further into the past for more helpful models of handing down cultural wisdom: “in modern literature we have had for many years an emphasis on ‘originality’ and ‘the anxiety of influence’ (an adolescent critical theory), as opposed, say, to Spenser’s filial admiration for Chaucer, or Dante’s for Virgil” (“Work” 165). Elsewhere I compare Berry’s view of tradition to Gadamer (“Lahiri’s Hawthornian Roots”).

<sup>5</sup> Berry’s description of his farm can be compared to comments he makes in an interview with Katherine Dalton where he uneasily defines himself as “a marginal Christian,” one troubled by much of this religion’s history (*Conversations* 192).

even more clearly the broader implications of Berry's use of tradition in *Remembering*. Carl Esbjornson and Phillip Donnelly, in separate essays, connect Berry's remembering of tradition—particularly the Bible, Dante, and Milton—with the reintegration of a properly placed community: “Ultimately, Andy's [the protagonist of *Remembering*] ‘remembering,’ as healing and as restoration to community, is achieved in part through the activity of ‘remembering,’ as the recollection of memories” (Donnelly 291). The act of remembering tradition enables Berry's exemplary fictional characters to become members of their present community.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, Berry agrees with Cather's insistence on the necessity of a historical community for a healthy ecological community: Latour has to learn to reconcile his own religious traditions with the native traditions he learns from Jacinto and Eusabio. Unlike “savage artists,” such as Cather's Ivar, who make ethical choices based on their individual relation to wild nature or to the Bible, characters like Andy and Jayber, or like Vaillant and Latour, become members of their communities by knowing and loving in the company of those who share their place, both now and in the past. Berry's fictional oeuvre reflects this in its form: many of his novels are told from the perspective of different members of the Port William community, and as these various speakers remember and retell stories about the same people, animals, and places, they stitch together a vision of a healthy, ongoing community.<sup>7</sup>

The second reason that Berry works within the Christian tradition is that this tradition contains wisdom regarding how to care for our places. Berry fully recognizes

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<sup>6</sup> Berry's use of “member” is certainly indebted to Paul's use of the term in passages such as I Cor. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Oehlschlaeger makes a related observation about the charitable form of Berry's diverse fictional voices (4–5).



that finding one's place in a less-than-perfect tradition can be a difficult task; he argues repeatedly that Christians have not always acted like Christians, that they have lived in deeply damaging ways.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, he argues that in order for Westerners to find their place in the order of Creation, they must have recourse to their tradition:

[I]f we want to use the world with care, we cannot exempt ourselves from our cultural inheritance, our tradition. This is a delicate subject at present because our cultural tradition happens to be Western, and there is now a fashion of disfavor toward the Western tradition. . . This tradition obviously involves errors and mistakes, damages and tragedies. But that only means that the tradition too must be used with care . . . and in fact care is a subject about which our tradition has much to teach. ("Conservation" 73–74)

Thus by caring for our tradition, we may perhaps learn how to care for our world, not only because we will have to humbly consider others who have shaped us, but also because our predecessors have thought about how we might care for our communities.

The Western religious tradition can lead us to care for the earth because it locates us within a large, mysterious world and makes us responsible for how we treat that world.

Berry postulates that the grounds for such reverence and duty may be found only in a religious tradition:

Right at the heart of the religious impulse there seems to be a certain solicitude for reality: the fear of foreclosing it or of reducing it to some merely human estimate. . . . As inhabitants of the modern world, we are religious now perhaps to the extent of our desire to crack open the coffin of materialism, and to give to reality a larger, freer definition than is allowed by the militant materialists of the corporate economy and their

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<sup>8</sup> In "The Gift of Good Land," Berry explicitly deals with Lynn White's landmark essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," and while he admits that Christians have often "condoned" and "perpetrated" the abuse of the earth, he proposes that the Judeo-Christian tradition contains much ecological wisdom that White fails to consider ("Gift" 268–69). While I focus on Berry's efforts to rehabilitate his Christian tradition, he also deals extensively with the racial problems of his Southern heritage in *The Hidden Wound*.

political servants or by the mechanical paradigm of reductive science.  
("Burden" 132–33)<sup>9</sup>

Here Berry declares that the popular materialisms of our day place us in a reduced, impoverished reality where our actions have limited significance. Elsewhere, Berry expands on this point, arguing that neither an evolutionary narrative nor a dualistic one can offer a properly extensive view of reality. Life "cannot matter much" and our choices are insignificant if "we think of ourselves as merely biological creatures, whose story is determined by genetics or environment." Similarly, if "we think of ourselves as lofty souls trapped temporarily in lowly bodies in a dispirited . . . world that we must despise for Heaven's sake, . . . then our relation to the material Creation becomes arbitrary" ("Christianity" 109). Both narratives teach us that we can treat the material world however we want; they offer no reason for thinking that we will be held accountable for how we care for the earth. However, if "we believe that we are living souls, God's dust and God's breath, acting our parts among other creatures all made of the same dust and breath as ourselves . . . then all our acts have a supreme significance" ("Christianity" 110). By locating us within this story, the biblical tradition makes humans responsible for how they act within God's good creation.

Because Berry believes that this "Creation is one continuous fabric comprehending simultaneously what we mean by 'spirit' and what we mean by 'matter'" ("Health" 91), he concludes that there are not separate "[m]oral, practical, spiritual, esthetic, economic, and ecological values" but rather that "there is only one value: the life

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<sup>9</sup> In another essay Berry makes a similar point, writing that "we cannot define [the Great Economy] except by way of a religious tradition" ("Two Economies" 56). And in his book on Harlan Hubbard, Berry surmises that even Hubbard's unconventional views on religion were formed from his reading of the Bible: "Probably one cannot make the most of earthly goods and enjoyments without recourse to a spiritual tradition, and Harlan's memory of the Bible evidently served him in this way" (*Harlan* 38).

and health of the world” (“Discipline” 164). Berry defines health broadly, taking the tradition encoded in our language as his precedent: “the concept of health is rooted in the concept of wholeness. . . . The word *health* belongs to a family of words, a listing of which will suggest how far the consideration of health must carry us: *heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, holy*” (*Unsettling* 103). These words indicate that health includes categories normally considered separately, and yet Berry critiques the industrial “money economy” precisely because it is not “comprehensive enough” and so destroys the health of what it does not comprehend (“Two Economies” 54). In its place, he turns to the “Kingdom of God” or the “Great Economy” as the order that names the health of all God’s creation. Like Thoreau, who based his economy on the most comprehensive currency he could imagine—“the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it” (*WA* 31)—the economy of the Kingdom of God includes in its accounting all the exchanges of God’s abundant life.<sup>10</sup> The Kingdom of God is the economy in which “the fall of every sparrow is a significant event” (55); it is the source of all real value (61); it is the process by which sunlight and soil make “life out of death” (62). The Kingdom of God thus includes not only what we typically think of as economic relationships, but also ecological relationships, which both come from the Greek root *oikos*.<sup>11</sup>

What makes the Kingdom of God such an exacting standard for life is that humans can only partially understand the complex, mysterious order within which we live. Berry infers some of its principles, but all we can know for sure is that “we live

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<sup>10</sup> Oehlschlaeger also compares Thoreau’s definition of cost with Berry’s comprehensive understanding of economy (54).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Woods also notes this etymological connection in the context of Berry’s thought (203).

within order and that this order is both greater and more intricate than we can know” (“Two Economies” 55). Because we cannot know it fully, we cannot control it or tame it. Berry thus claims, “[God] is the wildest being in existence. The presence of His spirit in us is our wildness, our oneness with the wilderness of Creation” (“Christianity” 101). God and his creation cannot be comprehended by mere humans, and yet because we live within this order, we must learn to live in reverence and humility, adapting our human economies to serve the health of the economy of God’s Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

The wild order of the Kingdom of God, Berry believes, is based ultimately upon love: “I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love” (“Health” 89). This love, “incarnate and indwelling in the world,” testifies to the particular value of each individual. As Berry writes, the “point of the Incarnation” is “Christ’s unfailing compassion for sufferers, whom He healed, one by one” (*Life* 101). The particularity of Christ’s ministry, Berry explains, is mirrored in the Bible’s “alertness to the individuality of things”; its writers “delight in the variety and individuality of creatures” because each individual matters to a God who became incarnate in a particular place and time (*Life* 102).<sup>13</sup> And, as Berry’s reference to Jesus’ compassion for individuals implies, the Incarnation not only testifies to the spiritual value of each individual, but also to the responsibility to care for each one physically. The Incarnation, as David Jeffrey explains, requires believers to back up their words with embodied

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<sup>12</sup> In another essay, I argue that part of Berry’s maturation as a novelist involved learning to write with more reverence and humility about how his characters fit within this order (“A Form for Living”).

<sup>13</sup> As indicated by the title of his essay “Think Little,” Berry has little hope for any large-scale solutions and instead advocates personal, particular actions, like growing a garden (“Think” 81–84). See also Berry’s explanation of how the insistence on “the preciousness of individual lives and places” combats the industrial view of material creatures as interchangeable (*Life* 42).

actions; Christians are “bound therefore to an accountable response to the Word of God, to deeds . . . which are mimetic of that Deed of the Incarnate Word” (377).<sup>14</sup> Particular, placed actions then demonstrate one’s commitment to honoring each life in the way that the Incarnation does. According to Berry, “the way of love” that Jesus describes “is not just a feeling” but is “a practical love; it is to be practiced, here and now” (“Burden” 134). When we practice love, we treat each life as “infinitely holy,” recognizing that “*all* creatures live by participating in the life of God” (“Burden” 136). Berry points to the story of the Good Samaritan to ask, “where more than in the Gospels’ teaching about love do we see that famously estranged pair, matter and spirit, melt and flow together?” (“Burden” 134). This is the abundant life of God, shared by all creation, that Jesus invites us to enter by participating in his Kingdom.

Yet because this loving order maintained in the Kingdom of God transcends distinctions between matter and spirit, the proper human place within this “Great Economy” remains complex, including chronological, hierarchical, geographical, and social dimensions. Berry finds that his tradition, extending from the Bible and Homer, often raises “the question of the human place in Creation” and teaches that our individual and collective failure to understand and maintain this place has far-reaching consequences: “Not knowing where you are, you can make mistakes of the utmost seriousness: you can lose your soul or your soil, your life or your way home” (“Standing” 56; “Poetry and Place” 117). These intertwined consequences indicate Berry’s

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<sup>14</sup> See also Jeffrey’s discussion of the Incarnation on pgs. 242-46, and Berry’s extensive essay on words and reality, “Standing by Words,” where he states, “In affirming that there is a necessary and indispensable connection between language and truth, and therefore between language and deeds, I have certain precedents in mind. I begin with the Christian idea of the Incarnate Word, the Word entering the world as flesh, and inevitably therefore as action” (“Standing” 30).

conception of place as “social and geographical” as well as “hierarchical,” and his consideration of tradition signals his effort to find his proper place chronologically also (“Poetry and Place” 117). Berry describes this hierarchical dimension by reference to the medieval notion of “the Great Chain of Being” (“Standing” 47). John Muir makes a similar observation, calling man the “most influential half animal, half angel” (*Writings* 6: 6), but Berry draws out the implications of this position more fully. He explains that while the rest of the members of Creation stay in their proper place naturally, the human place “can only be maintained by choice”: “humans are so placed in the Chain—between angels and animals, partaking of both ‘natures,’ tempted toward both—as to *endanger* it. What threatens the integrity or wholeness or health of Creation is human pride; this goes to the roots of both the Greek and the Judaic lineages of Western culture” (“Poetry and Place” 139, 146). Berry’s robust conception of the human place justifies his conclusion that “to be in place is good and to be out of place is evil, for where we are with respect to our place both in the order of things and on earth is the definition of our whereabouts with respect to God and our fellow creatures” (“Poetry and Place” 192). Roger Lundin’s recognition of the combined “moral” and “geographical” dimensions to Berry’s notion of place leads him to describe Berry’s vision as a “*poetics of embodiment*” that strives to reunite these axes of place in a culture where they are increasingly dealt with independently (“Wendell Berry” 334). The way of love that humans should follow, then, is a way that seeks to undo the “simultaneous physical and metaphysical displacement” that Berry identifies in our contemporary culture (Cook 506).

One of the biblical stories that Berry draws on to understand more fully how humans are to remain in their place in God’s loving order is the gift of the Promised Land

to Israel. Of course this story has been important to Americans ever since the Puritans saw themselves as the “New-English Israel” (Mather, *Magnalia* 121), but in typical fashion, Berry examines this story more closely to argue that rather than sanction conquest, it offers instruction regarding how humans should live caringly in response to God’s gift: “In the Bible’s long working out of the understanding of this gift, we may find the beginning—and, by implication, the end—of the definition of an ecological discipline” (“Gift” 269). Although the Israelites seized their Promised Land with a ferocity matched by the American pursuit of Manifest Destiny, the Old Testament story also contains a “vein of light” that teaches us the possibility of growing into a less rapacious and more nurturing people. “This light,” Berry writes, “originates in the idea of the land as a gift—not a free or deserved gift, but a gift given upon certain rigorous conditions” (“Gift” 270). Israel had to remember that they were given the land under “a sort of tenancy,” and thus they could not buy or sell the land, had to let it lie fallow every seventh year, and had to return any rented land to its owners every fifty years. These restrictions “reminded [them] that the land is theirs only by gift; it exists in its own right, and does not begin or end with any human purpose” (“Gift” 271). The most exacting portion of the identity and role bestowed by this story, for Berry, is that the land “is not given as a reward” but as an undeserved gift to a “wicked and faithless” people: “having failed to deserve it beforehand, they must prove worthy of it afterwards; they must use it well” (“Gift” 272). Using the land well practices “an elaborate understanding of charity,” and with this Berry returns to the extensive view of love that we have already seen. And this story enables Berry to define clearly how this love must be enacted: “[love] cannot stop until it includes all Creation, for all creatures are parts of a whole upon which each is

dependent, and it is a contradiction to love your neighbor and despise the great inheritance on which his life depends” (“Gift” 273). Berry concludes from God’s gift of good land that we have a “divine mandate to use the world justly and charitably” and that this mandate “defines every person’s moral predicament as that of a steward” (“Gift” 275).

Throughout his essays, Berry returns to our predicament as stewards; if we have received God’s land in usufruct or as tenants, then we have received the grave duty of stewarding God’s beloved property.<sup>15</sup> As John 3:16 indicates, “the advent of Christ was made possible by God’s love for the world. . . . Belief in Christ is thus dependent on prior belief in the inherent goodness—the lovability—of the world” (“Christianity” 97). In another essay, Berry interprets Revelation 4:11—“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created”—to draw the similar conclusion that God takes pleasure in his Creation: “I think [this verse] proposes an indispensable standard for the stewardship both of things in use and of useless things and things set aside from use” (“God” 100). Like Thoreau’s understanding of “enjoy,” Berry argues that we are responsible to use creation in a way that “safeguard[s] God’s pleasure in His work” and allows us to participate in that pleasure (“God” 100).

It is because God loves and takes pleasure in his world that Berry calls our role of steward a predicament. We are responsible for how we use the beloved creation, and yet our finite capabilities make us unable to fully comprehend our use of this gift. Berry acknowledges our inevitable ignorance and finitude by practicing the Sabbath and by

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<sup>15</sup> Berry writes about the concept of usufruct in “God and Country”; see also “Renewing Husbandry” where he writes about his understanding of husbandry or stewardship at length.



urging us to follow what T. S. Eliot calls “the way of ignorance.” God instituted the Sabbath so that the Israelites could “see the limited efficacy of their work and thus . . . understand their true dependence” (“Two Economies” 56). This is the same lesson that Cather’s priests had to learn: they could not themselves redeem and reconcile the members of the desert communities but could only hope to be the means by which God enacted his redemption. One of the ways that Berry practices this understanding of his dependence is by writing Sabbath poems. On Sundays, he walks through the fields and woods around his farm and writes poetry; his poetic attention enacts his awareness that no matter how hard and well he works, he cannot adequately care for his place. Ultimately, this wild place lives from grace, from an order beyond him and upon which his work and life depend. As Berry writes about an exemplary farmer: “he has prepared a way / for his life to come to him, if it will” (*Collected Poems* 114). Recognizing his inability to grasp or control this pattern enables him to avoid the “arrogant ignorance” of modern technology and science that presumes it knows enough to accomplish its narrow ends and foresee and control all outcomes (“Way” 53–54). This arrogant ignorance has resulted in the nuclear industry and genetic engineering, ongoing experiments chosen by a few whose full effects on the rest of creation’s members are still unknown. As Berry remarks, “Adam was the first, but not the last, to choose for the whole human race” (*Life* 77).<sup>16</sup> A humble ignorance will be less likely to damage a beloved world that it does not fully comprehend.

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<sup>16</sup> The need for humans to be humble and reverent in the face of their irreparable ignorance is a recurring theme in Berry’s writings. See particularly his essay “The Way of Ignorance” where he critiques thinkers such as Richard Dawkins, and his book *Life is a Miracle*, where he rebukes E. O. Wilson, both figures whom Berry sees as insufficiently aware of their ignorance.

Yet while our ignorance might seem to be paralyzing, and does indeed place us in a “predicament,” Berry concludes that it demands from us humble, faithful, and skillful work. This is because, regardless of our ignorance and inability to adequately care for the gift of land we have been given, we all must use the world in order to live; if “we cannot exempt ourselves from use, then we must deal with the issues raised by use” (“Conservation” 73). These are the issues of stewardship or husbandry, which Berry defines as “all the practices that sustain life by connecting us conservingly to our places and our world; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us” (“Renewing” 97).<sup>17</sup> For Berry, caring use of the world requires us to consider “the issue of life-long devotion and perseverance in unheroic tasks, and the issue of good workmanship or ‘right livelihood’” (“Gift” 277). These considerations underlie Berry’s extensive writings on the character of good work, work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation. Berry envisions work, then, as the practical means to fulfill the divine end to which humans are called.

Berry’s good work, then, enables individuals to participate in and care for the wild order of the Kingdom of God upon which all the earth’s lives depend. Kimberly Smith explains the nature of this participation well:

For Berry . . . labor is morally significant not because it creates wealth but because labor is our primary means of relating to the physical and social world: It mediates our relationship to nature (by working the land) and to our community (to the extent we work together or for each other). Labor forces us to confront reality, to learn what it is and is not possible for us to

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<sup>17</sup> For a consideration of the gendered nature of this term, see my essay on Berry and ecofeminism (“Eros of Child” 302).

do, to understand our limits. In this way, labor helps us to realize . . . the good toward which an ideal human life aims. (156)<sup>18</sup>

Smith rightly perceives that for Berry, humans must work well to participate in the harmony of the natural and social world; insufficient or poorly done work will damage these orders. In addition, Smith points out that by forcing humans to grapple with physical reality, work can reveal the misconceptions of human visions, enabling individuals to correct false perceptions of their social and physical relations. For instance, a farmer may want to grow crops on a steep Kentucky hillside, but if he attempts to work out this vision, heavy rains may wash away the plowed soil and cause permanent damage to the land.<sup>19</sup> This work reveals the failure of the farmer's vision to align with reality, and it is in this way that work can correct human visions that are inadequate to the reality of their objects. While Smith's discussion of the way Berry sees work enacting right human relations and correcting inadequate human visions is excellent, she does not explore the character of the cultural forms in which Berry sees good work enacted, the places Berry finds good work being done. Berry values certain cultural forms like farming and marriage because these forms contain the disciplines—such as fidelity and humility—that ought to guide and limit our work given our inevitable ignorance of the world within which we live.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See also Roger Lundin's essay "Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Marriage and Embodiment" in which he defines Berry's morally good work in a similar, if less precise, manner. Using marital terms, Lundin claims Berry's "work takes the beautiful tensions and blessed intimacies of marriage to be symbolic of the right and dynamic relationship of body and soul, self and nature, culture and the earth" ("Wendell Berry" 340).

<sup>19</sup> In Berry's novel *A Place on Earth*, Mat remembers a time when his son Virgil plowed too far over the brow of a hill and a heavy rain washed away the soil (*A Place* 180).

<sup>20</sup> In Oehlschlaeger's discussion of these forms that Berry upholds, he uses MacIntyre's Aristotelian understanding of practices to help elucidate how Berry finds virtues in our cultural practices (9–42).

It is in response to our predicament of having to use places and processes that we do not fully understand that Berry writes so extensively on how to do good, affectionate work within the bounds of certain cultural forms. Motivated by love and guided by imagination, this work mediates between our imperfect vision of health and the particular realities and limits of our places. Disciplined by virtues like fidelity and humility, this work can contribute to the healing of both our damaged places and our insufficient imaginations; work thus cultivates a reciprocal relation between imagination and reality. While the imagination may seem like an odd faculty to consider when defining good work, Berry sees the imagination as the capacity that allows us to envision the health of a pattern that we cannot wholly comprehend and so make our work participate in its health. Love for the life and health of a holy world naturally leads us to imagine how we can participate in healing broken places and preserving abundant life. Our working out of this imagined wholeness connects our desire for health with the needs and realities of our place; work thus mediates between imagination and reality, correcting and shaping our vision of a healthy order.

Yet Berry always depicts good work being done in the context of certain cultural forms which discipline love and enable its imaginings to become accountable to the reality of a place. Inherent in farming, and other analogous forms, are disciplines suitable to our limitations: farmers do not cultivate all of the earth but only one particular field; farmers do not move from field to field but remain in one place for many years so that they are responsible for the consequences of their work and can correct their mistakes over time; farmers do not work alone but with their families and neighbors. Local, faithful work has the potential to actually enact one's love for a place—to fulfill one's

predicament as a steward—because it can make this love responsible—able to respond—to the real needs of a place. Berry returns to this complex interplay of love, imagination, work, and reality in the context of several different cultural practices or forms, most often marriage, farming, and poetry, but also worship, teaching, and medicine, among others. A brief look at how Berry describes this process in the context of farming and writing will clarify the ways in which this interplay can participate in the healing of our places.

In his essay “People, Land, and Community,” Berry offers a cohesive vision of how love leads a farmer to imagine the health of his land and then to correct his imagination by hard, faithful work, which ultimately serves the health of his place. He claims that “a farmer’s connection to a farm . . . begin[s] in love. . . . One loves the place because present appearances recommend it, and because they suggest possibilities irresistibly imaginable” (“People” 69). These imagined possibilities may not be realistic given the actual conditions of the farm, but like a young lover, the farmer’s affection blinds him to the blemishes of his new farm:

When one buys a farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts. . . . One’s work may be defined in part by one’s visions, but it is defined in part too by problems, which the work leads to and reveals. And daily life, work, and problems gradually alter the visions. It invariably turns out, I think, that one’s first vision of one’s place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one’s sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one’s love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one’s visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life—*all* have changed by mutual correction. . . . One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is. (“People” 70)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In “The Long-Legged House,” Berry describes his return to a Kentucky farm in very similar terms, as his imagination of the possibilities of the place was corrected by his work there. He also compares this process of coming to his place on his farm with the growth of his and Tanya’s marriage (“Long-Legged” 126–31).

Through the farmer's faithful work, the farmer contributes, over time, to the harmonious life of the place, and through the problems and realities of the place and the work these difficulties require, the farmer is changed and comes to more fully participate in the good life of the place. This mutually corrective work depends on the farmer's love for and commitment to the land; it is only possible if the farmer stays in one place and works a piece of land small enough for him to know well. This same pattern of love being proved and corrected through faithful work equally applies to the other cultural forms Berry upholds; one's initial love for one's spouse or God or place is often naïve and fails to be adequate to the person one is married to or the God one worships or the place one writes about, but through "daily life, work, and problems," innocent, naïve love can be shaped, corrected, and made more adequate to the value truly inherent in the one loved.

Berry often describes this process in the context of marriage, and the following readings of his novels will return to this form, but given the continued discussion within ecocriticism regarding how writers should represent the physical world, it is worth understanding how Berry articulates this process in the context of a writer who seeks to love and honor a place. The task of the imaginative writer who wants to serve the health of his or her place is not, according to Berry, to seek to represent it precisely. Ecocritics have often been distracted by the accuracy or inaccuracy of nature writing, showing how genre conventions, ideology, poor observation, or any number of other factors prevent a writer from "accurately" representing the natural environment. Lawrence Buell ends up defending "external nonhuman reality as a criterion of accuracy and value" in our evaluation of literature, arguing that while we should never discount the "constructedness" of all human writing, an external, objective standard nonetheless "is

far more productive” for an ecocriticism that wants to protect and preserve the nonhuman world (*Environmental Imagination* 113).<sup>22</sup> Berry certainly agrees that the material world should act as a standard for writing, but his understanding of imagination makes such arguments over the value of ecomimesis of secondary importance. “From the requirement of imaginative completeness,” Berry writes in his study of William Carlos Williams’s poetry, “it follows that a work of art must not be an illusion of reality.” A merely accurate representation simply “plagiarize[s]” nature and does not help us imagine its health (*Poetry* 153).

While all the authors in this study value accurately representing external reality, they value something like Berry’s imaginative completeness more: thus Thoreau refuses to write pure science and instead writes natural philosophy and history; Muir imputes spiritual and emotional experiences to his readers; Cather writes a medieval-style legend; Berry writes poems and novels.<sup>23</sup> Berry follows their intuition when he insists that there is a “vital link between imagination and compassion” (*Life* 87), between how we conceive of our place and how we care for it. So he strives in his writing to “complete the picture,” to create a whole vision of what the Kingdom of God would look like in his community (“Imagination” 4). Yet to keep this imaginative vision faithful to the realities of his place, Berry tests it against his life within this place:

Both imagination and a competent sense of reality are necessary to our life, and they necessarily discipline one another. Only imagination, for example, can give our home landscape and community a presence in our minds that is a sort of vision at once geographical and historical, practical and protective, affectionate and hopeful. But if that vision is not

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<sup>22</sup> Buell returns to this complex subject in a more recent book also (*Future* 29-61).

<sup>23</sup> Thus none of them desire to “go beyond the aesthetic dimension” and represent some pure nature, which Morton fears is the bane of much nature writing (*Ecology* 31).

repeatedly corrected by a fairly accurate sense of reality, if the vision becomes fantastical or merely wishful, then both we and the landscape fall into danger; we may destroy the landscape, or the landscape (especially if damaged by us in our illusion) may destroy us. (*Life* 85)

Thus, as Berry insists upon again and again, “What we write is finally to be measured by the health of what we write about. What we think we know affects the health of the thing we think we know” (*Life* 88). Like the farmer whose work in his place causes him to change his imaginative hopes for his land, Berry’s life and work in his place correct and guide his imaginative writing about it.

Berry’s way of love, then, is a process by which humans can respond to their predicament as stewards of a world that they can’t fully understand. Imagining and working toward the health of their communities fulfills their responsibility to care for their place. And by faithfully and humbly remaining in the place they work, humans can allow the realities and limits of their place to correct their vision. This approach enables people to work out their love for the gift of life that God has given while recognizing their inevitable ignorance regarding how to care for this gift and their fallen tendency to serve selfish desires rather than the health of their communities. Berry’s way of love enables work to remain accountable to the real needs of each place. Being accountable to one’s place may mean, as Jayber feared, that one’s imaginative vision needs to be drastically corrected, and working in the context of one’s tradition, community, and physical place makes such correction possible.

#### *Following the Way of Love with Jayber Crow*

Near the end of *Jayber Crow*, Jayber becomes increasingly frustrated with humanity’s arrogant ignorance that causes so much war and destruction, and he wishes



that God would send a message so clear no one could misunderstand it: “I could imagine the almighty finger writing in stars for all the world to see: GO HOME” (*JC* 295). In the absence of such a sign, however, Jayber must learn how to read and follow more subtle markers if he is to find his way home, if he is to learn how to care for his place in God’s Kingdom. Berry’s exemplary protagonist discovers these needed landmarks in the Bible and the Western literary tradition.<sup>24</sup> These traditions preserve stories of people who have failed to properly connect their minds to their places and so have made decisions that estranged and damaged these places, but they also contain examples of pilgrims who follow a way of love and so redemptively care for both themselves and their homes. While Jayber loses his home early in his life, he gradually learns to interpret the cairns of the past in the context of his place and so follow them into a loving relationship with his home. Jayber’s story, then, illustrates how tradition can guide humans into a responsible and active way of love for their place and its members.

The whole novel is written in Jayber’s voice as he looks back over his life in his old age; this is the perspective Berry employs in many of his novels because it allows his protagonists to remember their stories in the context of their religious, literary, and local traditions. By accepting his membership in these cross-temporal communities, Jayber demonstrates his love and care for their members and learns from them how to live responsibly in Port William, his geographic home. Like Berry’s choice to cultivate a

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<sup>24</sup> Because *Jayber Crow* portrays Jayber as an exemplary character, Berry’s nonfiction enriches our understanding of Jayber’s development. As Janet Goodrich points out, Berry’s fiction is in many ways autobiographical (9–23), so while Jayber is a fictional character with plenty of differences from Berry, perhaps most obviously his profession as a barber, Jayber’s path shares several notable similarities to Berry’s own life: both went to boarding school (Logsdon 243), both leave their homes and feel like they have been led back to obey their calling (*Conversations* 201–02), and both are marginal Christians with plenty of quibbles about the Bible (*Conversations* 192; *JC* 320). Because of the integrity of Berry’s vision and the sympathy with which he characterizes Jayber, setting Jayber’s pilgrimage in the context of Berry’s nonfiction seems not only justifiable but necessary.

damaged religious tradition and a marginalized farm, Jayber's way of love—which places him temporally, geographically, hierarchically, and socially—testifies to the inestimable value of the other people and creatures with whom he shares God's gift of life.

As Jayber remembers his life, he figures it as a homecoming along both geographical and hierarchical axes. Jayber, whose given name is Jonah, plainly states the geographical nature of his pilgrimage when he recalls, “My relation to that place [Port William], my being in it and my absences from it, is the story of my life” (*JC* 12). Thus, his story begins when he was cast adrift in the world at the age of four after both of his parents died. And while a neighbor couple took him into their home for the next six years, when they too died Jonah left the place of his birth and went to an orphanage, the ironically-named Good Shepherd. The superintendent of this institution indicated Jonah's lostness when he told him, “Mr. Crow, since I believe you have not yet found your way to Nineveh, I will call you J” (*JC* 31). The loss of his place, identity, and name led Jayber to strive to be sufficient unto himself, to be his own context: “I was just a scantling boy, scared and out of place and (as I now see) odd. Not just lonely, but solitary, living as much as I could in secret, looking about, seeing much, revealing little” (*JC* 38). Keeping himself “aloof” from everyone seemed to enable his survival, but by estranging him from his place it threatened his ability to find his way home (*JC* 69).

Because of Jayber's spatial and communal displacement, he could not follow Christ's exemplary prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, a landmark in his tradition by which he should have been able to place himself hierarchically. After he grew old enough to leave the Good Shepherd, Jayber felt called to go into ministry, so he enrolled in a nearby seminary. As he studied the Bible, however, Jayber began to have

troublesome questions about its seeming contradictions. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, these difficulties became insurmountable when Jayber realized that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane was refused. This means, Jayber concluded, "that in spite of your prayers you are going to suffer. It means you may be crucified" (*JC* 51). This revelation caused him to doubt the efficacy of any prayer and to question whether he could submit to God's will if it might indeed be this terrible: "Are there some things He wants us to learn that we can't learn except by falling into the abyss? Is that why the Jonah of old, who could not say 'thy will be done,' had to lie three days and three nights in the dark in the belly of the great fish? 'Father, remove this cup from me,' I prayed. And there I stopped" (52). It was this similarity with his namesake—his inability to trust that God's will is always good and his resultant propensity to run rather than to obey this will—that sent Jonah Crow away from seminary and caused him to become, like Dante at the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*, "a lost traveler wandering in the woods, needing to be on my way somewhere but not knowing where" (*JC* 52).

Jayber's attempts to forge his own solitary way only increased his geographic and hierarchic displacement, and he spent nearly two years in Lexington in this state of placeless suspension. He took some university literature classes and worked as a barber to earn enough money to live, but the memories of his boyhood days near Port William made him restless and dissatisfied with his solitary, aimless life. Jayber describes his gradual turn toward his home as a turn toward Eden: "[I]n my hopelessness and sorrow, I began a motion of the heart toward my origins. Far from rising above them, I was longing to sink into them until I would know the fundamental things. I needed to know the original first chapter of the world" (*JC* 73). Like the biblical flood which God used to

wash the world clean and establish a new covenant with his creation, a torrential rainstorm acts as the impetus for Jayber to leave Lexington and return to Port William. As he crossed the shuddering bridge that would lead him home, pausing mid-span to look at the chaotic, “shapeless” current rushing toward him, his mind turned to Genesis 1:2 and the authority this creation account gives to the Creator:

[T]he words were just right there in my mind, and I knew they were true: ‘the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.’ . . . [A]fter all my years of reading in that book and hearing it read and believing and disbelieving it, I seemed to have wandered my way back to the beginning—not just of the book, but of the world—and all the rest was yet to come. (*JC* 79)

This experience convinced Jayber that the “Spirit that made [the created world] was *in* it, shaping it and reshaping it” (*JC* 83), and this belief in God’s continuing authority enabled him to return to his geographic place of Port William with the determination to also seek his Edenic place, the place where he could, like the newly-created Adam and Eve, submit to and participate in God’s will.

When Jayber reached Port William he discovered the town’s barber had recently left, so he bought the vacant shop and established himself as a member of the town. As a barber, he heard much of the town’s conversation about itself, and from his neighbors who frequented the barbershop, Jayber witnessed many different ways that individuals tried to relate to their places. He judged these methods, and began to work out the one he would follow, by comparing them to his cultural tradition. Two paradigmatic examples taught Jayber that failing to choose and act from a proper relation to one’s place leads to destruction and enslavement. These failures stem either from being too passive, and not doing the hard work of love, or from being arrogant, and acting from selfish desires and

not for the health of one's place. Jayber must navigate between these two examples, which roughly parallel the passive attitude of Eusabio and the arrogant attitude of Martínez, neither of which are proper for Latour. To use Berry's terms, humans are "tempted toward both" "angels and animals" and need to maintain their proper place by careful discernment ("Poetry and Place" 146).

The first failure Jayber encountered involves following only one's "animal" or appetitive side and so allowing one's place too much authority ("Poetry and Place" 146). Jayber learned about this error from Athey Keith, an old farmer who frequented his barbershop. One day, one of Jayber's customers unexpectedly uttered a racial slur, and Jayber was silent, unsure how to respond; his silence indicates his failure to imagine how he might care for the honor of all the members of Port William. Athey, however, was "a man of standing" (*JC* 214) and sternly rebuked the other man, telling him "It might prove out to be . . . that if we can't live together we can't live at all" (*JC* 215). Athey's exemplary understanding of how to stand firmly in his place and not allow his imagination to be warped by the racial disease of his community enabled him to take the needed action. Immediately after recounting this incident, Jayber remembers a story Athey had told him about his boyhood when Athey learned the hard way about the importance of working for the health of his community.

Interestingly, Athey places his story in the context of a biblical story, Aaron and the golden calf, thus also modeling for Jayber a way of interpreting the Bible in the context of one's own placed action. Athey describes a time when he was twelve years old and his father had to leave the farm during the hog butchering. Athey would have to be responsible for overseeing the men who came to help. The work began well, but one

of the latecomers brought a large keg of moonshine and set it “in the midst of the people, Athey said, like the golden calf” (*JC* 221). At this juncture Athey, like Aaron, chose according to a diseased, idolatrous standard of health and so passively allowed his community to continue in bondage. As Athey said, “I ought to have picked up the axe that was leaning right there and split that keg wide open. . . . But that was when I played the boy and not the man. After that, I stayed a boy more or less to the end of it” (*JC* 221). He is a boy because, like Aaron, he allows his imagination and resultant actions to be determined for him by his circumstances. The men continued working well for awhile, but “the exalted keg” finally conquered their weary bodies, and the work became mixed with drinking (*JC* 222). Their drunken, sloppy butchering ended when the Regulators, a “local whiskey monopoly,” rode up with rifles and locked all the hog butchers into the stripping room (*JC* 224). The consequences of Israel’s idolatry, of imagining according to a false standard of health, are always exile and bondage, and the consequences were no different for the hog butchers.<sup>25</sup>

But Athey, unlike Aaron who appears fully complicit in Israel’s worship of the golden calf, realized his own failure and took what responsibility he still could. After the Regulators stuffed themselves with fresh pork and washed it down with the rest of the whiskey, they fell asleep. Athey then hid their guns, unlocked the door of the stripping room, and turned the Regulators’ horses out of the stable. A fistfight ensued in which the hog butchers, who by this time had sobered up a bit, were able to knock down the drunken Regulators. It was to this state of confusion and disarray that Athey’s father

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<sup>25</sup> Berry offers a definition of idolatry in “Christianity and the Survival of Creation” that applies to this situation: “Idolatry always reduces to the worship of something ‘made with hands,’ something confined within the terms of human work and human comprehension” (“Christianity” 101).

returned, and Athey immediately faces him and confesses, “It’s all my fault” (*JC* 229).

The courage of his admission contrasts starkly to both Aaron’s attempts to evade responsibility when Moses returned from Mount Sinai to find the Israelites dancing naked around the calf (Ex. 32.22–24) and Adam and Eve’s similar attempts to shirk their culpability (Gen. 3.12–13). While Athey failed to act in accordance with his place, he learned here the need to not allow his imagination to be warped by a false standard of health and to have the courage to take responsible action to maintain his place. His experience here equipped him to take a stand in Jayber’s barbershop years later and to encourage Jayber not to abdicate his responsibility to his place by allowing his place to determine his decisions for him.<sup>26</sup>

The opposite failure occurs when one attempts to rise above the proper human place and to make decisions based only upon the “angel” side of human nature, giving no regard to one’s place (“Poetry and Place” 146). As Satan tempted Eve by telling her that she and Adam could be like gods, so many of their descendents in Port William continue to base their actions upon the belief that they are like gods and are independent of any physical constraints (Gen. 3.5). This lie contradicts the human place in the hierarchy of Creation and leads people—as Cather warned through her characterization of Father Martínez—to make arrogant decisions with insufficient regard for their context and the consequences their actions have on it. While several members of the Port William community are tempted in this direction, the paradigmatic exemplar of this failure is Troy Chatham. Jayber watched Troy grow up as a young basketball star who had his cap set

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<sup>26</sup> When Jayber was older, he thought of Athey’s reply one day when another customer, Troy, made a comment about killing war protestors and communists; Athey’s example enabled Jayber to kindly but firmly quote Christ’s command to love our enemies (*JC* 287).

for Mattie Keith, Athey's daughter. Jayber disapproved of Troy because of his arrogant, showy attitude (*JC* 134–138), but Troy was also a confident, handsome young man and so Jayber is disappointed but not surprised when Mattie married him over the quiet objections of her parents (*JC* 176–177). Troy and Mattie then moved into a tenant house on the Keith's farm, and Troy joined Athey in his work. Athey, who matured from his boyish failures to become an excellent, careful farmer, worked not to maximize profit but to nourish the fertility and health of his place, thus enacting a proper regard for his context (*JC* 179). Troy, in contrast, works with the sole goal of an ever-growing bank account: "Never let a quarter's worth of equity stand idle. Use it or borrow against it" (*JC* 179). Troy's attitude toward the land's health, one of voracious use, stems from his arrogant belief that he is separated from and elevated above the land's life. Troy works out this belief with his pursuit of ever faster and more powerful tractors. These tractors reinforce Troy's vision of himself as able to fully control and master his land and place. The only consideration that enters Troy's imagination is how much corn he can extract from his land with the latest, most powerful machine. Jayber makes the connection between this kind of disregard for place and the original pride that caused the fall when he describes the interstate's similar intrusion upon Port William: "That great road—moving, it seemed, purely according to its own will—was the mark of an old flaw come newly ordered into the world" (*JC* 282). Troy's imagination falls short, then, because it leads him to act purely according to his own displaced, hubristic will.

Troy's lack of concern for the health of his place, and his work done with tractors in disregard for the limits of his land, caused him to become increasingly estranged from his place. He and Athey never could work well together since they worked toward such



different ends, and as Athey grew older and had to give up the hard labor of the farm, he refused to let Troy buy his land and instead allowed him to stay only as his tenant (*JC* 232). Rather than submit himself to correction from his father-in-law, Troy increased the scale of his dreams: “His belief (his religion, you might as well say) was that if he went on covering ever more ground with ever greater power, discounting the costs in worry, weariness, and soil erosion, he could finally be a success. . . . He was a dreamer. He could not imagine himself as he was or where he was” (*JC* 271). These romantic dreams promised freedom from the limits of his context, but they led Troy into debt and bondage to the very constraints from which he sought to be free. In reflecting on Troy’s failure, Jayber sees clearly that Troy became enslaved because “his point of reference was himself.”<sup>27</sup> Jayber acknowledges that this may be forgivable in a boy, but because Troy “never outgrew it,” he never made his imagination properly accountable to external reference points, one of which Jayber believes should have been Troy’s wife Mattie (*JC* 338). Troy’s failure to include Mattie and his farm’s health as reference points eventually caused his debt to become the determiner for his choices, and so Jayber sums up Troy’s situation by concluding that “He . . . worked like a slave, and he was one” (*JC* 339). In a mirror image of the hog butchers whose hermeneutic put inordinate importance on one reference point—the keg of whiskey—Troy’s longstanding failure to interpret and act with any consideration for his context—his wife, his land, or his community—led to his bondage.

Both Athey’s youthful failing and Troy’s life-long failing reveal the failure of any imagination that operates without living and working in a proper relation to its place.

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<sup>27</sup> See also Jayber’s comparison of Troy and Athey in which he describes Troy’s reference point as himself and Athey’s as the farm’s health (*JC* 181–83).

Because their love for their place was weak and immature, they were vulnerable to the temptation to interpret and make decisions according to incomplete standards. Jayber comes to inhabit his place by learning from both his Port William neighbors, like Athey, and his literary tradition; these communities teach him how to make his love accountable. When Jayber moved into the Port William community and gradually became “involved” in the warp and woof of the place’s life, he realized the formidable necessity of making choices based upon a proper relation to his place (*JC* 123, 137, 147). As Jayber begins to deal with his unexpected feelings of love for Mattie Keith Chatham, he comes to see the need to understand and act on this love in accordance with his place. Ultimately, as Athey recognized his own boyhood failing by measuring it against Israel’s wandering after the golden calf, and as Jayber recognized Troy’s failing by measuring it against Adam and Eve’s failing in Eden, so he recognizes the shortcomings of his initial attempts to rightly love Mattie and his place by measuring them against Dante’s exemplary love for Beatrice. By following Dante’s example and avoiding the errors of the Proverbial fool, Jayber learns to practice a way of love that provides a proper accounting between himself and his context and enables him to act fittingly and caringly in his place. As Dante’s love led him to Eden on top of Mount Purgatory and eventually through Paradise, so Jayber’s love leads him to Mattie’s Edenic Nest Egg, a place of order, fecundity, revelation, and, eventually, a participation in divine love.

As a student Jayber read and enjoyed Dante, and he refers to himself as a wanderer in the “dark woods of error” (*JC* 71, 66).<sup>28</sup> But Jayber also explicitly

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<sup>28</sup> While no one has yet written about *Jayber Crow* in any detail, two critics have made passing mention of its Dantean elements. Jason Peters claims that Dante “is a tutelary spirit of *Jayber Crow*” (330) and Donnelly notes that both *Remembering* and *Jayber Crow* contain “sustained Dantean engagements” (275). Neither, however, expands upon these observations.

differentiates his own “ignorant” pilgrimage from Dante’s: “If you could do it, I suppose, it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line—starting, say, in the Dark Wood of Error, and proceeding by logical steps through Hell and Purgatory and into Heaven. . . . But that is not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked” (*JC* 133). Although Jayber cannot map Dante’s pilgrimage directly onto his own, immediately after this statement of dissimilarity he states, “I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led” (*JC* 133). Berry’s description of the way he and Gurney Norman lead each other references Virgil in a similar way: “We have traveled many other days and nights in Eastern Kentucky, Gurney always serving as my faithful guide and interpreter, my Virgil, telling me what to see and what it meant, telling me the stories, *his* stories, that belong to the places we have gone—as I suppose I have served as his Virgil in our travels down here at the lower end, which is my end, of the Kentucky River” (“My Conversation” 21). And yet as Dante cannot be led through Paradise by Virgil, so Jayber writes about the ultimate failure of reason to guide him, indicating his recognition that he must finally be guided by a Beatrice figure rather than a Virgil figure (*JC* 143-44, 252). Immediately after Jayber writes that he cannot “shake off the feeling that I have been led,” he turns to the story of his relationship with Mattie. So while Jayber is certainly led toward his place by many things and people—his books (*JC* 33, 47, 68–71), Burley Coulter (*JC* 90–91, 124, 318), Mat Feltner (*JC* 200–202), and Athey Keith (*JC* 178–182, 210–213)—his ultimate guide is Mattie and his love for her. Virgil can lead Dante only through Inferno and Purgatory; similarly, if Jayber wants to glimpse Paradise, he must be led by love.

In the very beginning of the novel, Jayber describes his first encounter with Mattie before moving further back to recount his childhood. He remembers their initial meeting in terms strikingly reminiscent of Dante's descriptions of Beatrice in both *Vita Nuova* and *Il Convivio*. Jayber recalls that he was standing outside of his barbershop enjoying the spring afternoon when Mattie walked by, laughing with two of her schoolmates:

I saw Mattie Keith then, and after that I would be aware of her. . . . She was a pretty girl, and I was moved by her prettiness. Her hair was brown at the verge of red, and curly. . . . But it was her eyes that most impressed me. They were nearly black and had a liquid luster. The brief, laughing look that she had given me made me feel extraordinarily seen, as if after that I might be visible in the dark. (*JC* 9–10)

When Dante first meets Beatrice as a young girl, she is wearing crimson, which is the color of charity; at their second meeting, when she passed him in a street, she walked between two female companions (*Vita* 2.3, 3.1). Even more striking than the color and number of companions associated with both of these young girls is the way Dante and Jayber focus on the eyes and mouths of their beloveds. Dante explains that “*her eyes and . . . her sweet smile . . . may be called, in a lovely simile, balconies of the lady [the soul] who inhabits the edifice of the body*” (*Banquet* 3.8).<sup>29</sup> Berry concurs with the concomitant erotic and spiritual power of the eyes when he states, “Looking into one another’s eyes, lovers recognize their encounter as a meeting not merely of two bodies but of two living souls” (“Sex” 134). The importance of the “countenance” explains why Jayber was so drawn to Mattie’s eyes on their first encounter and why he later remembers her in her youth as a “clear-spirited girl with all her feeling right there in her eyes . . . and

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Williams glosses this in relation to Dante’s other writings and notes its layered spiritual and philosophical meanings as well as its physical perceptiveness (65–66).

. . . with a good openhearted smile” (*JC* 134). Later Jayber will note that after she grew into a woman, Mattie’s eyes exercised the same power (*JC* 191). And at the end of the novel, Mattie’s unveiled smile inducts him into beatific light (*JC* 351, 363). As these similarities suggest, Jayber understands his affection for Mattie in Dantean terms, and these provide him with a reference point by which to judge and correct his love for her.

Jayber did not initially love Mattie amorously, but he observed her coming of age with interest and hope, and when she married Troy, he was disappointed with her choice, wishing she would have married a man more like her father (*JC* 176–177). One day several years later, however, Jayber’s feelings toward Mattie changed as he watched her playing with some children in the church lawn: “She was just perfectly there with them in her pleasure. I was all of a sudden overcome with love for her” (*JC* 191). His emotions were so powerful they made him feel drunk (cf. *Vita* 3.2), and he struggled to understand how to deal with these feelings for a married woman.

At first, Jayber nearly succumbed to the temptations of romanticism, of loving in a way that fails to be accountable to his place. His desire for Mattie led him “to contrive . . . to be near her” (cf. *Vita* 2.8), and at times his desire demanded, “like a spoiled child,” what it could not have (*JC* 193). Jayber began to compare himself, quite favorably, with Troy, and his imagination invented scenarios between him and Mattie that “had nothing to do with anything in this world” (*JC* 196). Just like Troy, whose dreams made him “an escapee” (*JC* 241), Jayber’s unearthly fantasies threatened to lead him out of his place, but Jayber ultimately realized the “incompleteness of [his] vision” and corrected it by forcing his imagination to be accountable to his place—who and where Mattie was, who

and where he was, and what their responsibilities were (*JC* 196).<sup>30</sup> And yet Jayber's submission to his place only caused his love for her to possess him more completely: "After the figments of presumption and delusion had fallen away and I again saw myself as I was and my circumstances as they were, I loved her more, and more clearly, than I did before. I became able to imagine her as she was and not as a subject of a dream. In my thoughts of her, she stood apart from me. I seemed to see her whole" (*JC* 198). In order to follow this purified love for Mattie, however, Jayber must order his life according to this love and choose against the things that would pull him away; he must put this feeling of love to work.

Before falling in love with Mattie, Jayber had made two choices that threatened to separate him from his place. The first was to purchase a car so that he could drive into the larger town near Port William and participate in its Saturday night society. Immediately after buying it, he felt uncomfortable with its insatiable demand for cash: "Like certain women I had encountered out in the great world, it would not be available unless paid" (*JC* 167). And like the Proverbial harlot whose house leads to hell (Prov. 7.27), this form of transportation runs on infernal principles: "It seemed to me more than a little hellish to be traveling by fire" (*JC* 167). Yet even though Jayber sensed the car's dangerous lure, it still presented itself as "shiny and stately" to his imagination, and it "deeply impressed" him (*JC* 167–168). Like the siren Dante met in Purgatory who seemed beautiful when he allowed his eyes to gaze on her (*Purgatorio* 19.10–15), the

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<sup>30</sup> In "Poetry and Place," Berry critiques Shelly for similar imaginative failings ("Poetry and Place" 166–69). See also Earnest's failure of imagination in *A Place on Earth* when he allows himself to romantically love Ida, a married woman (*A Place* 261–66). His failure leads to his suicide.

beauty and power of Jayber's "wonderful machine" seduced his unguarded eyes (*JC* 187).

With the freedom of movement his car provided, Jayber soon began to go out with a waitress in town named Clydie. While he did not really "love" Clydie, Jayber "liked her hugely" (*JC* 174), so for six or seven years they lived their separate lives and shared weekend nights of intimacy. But once Jayber began to love Mattie, he knew that he would have to choose between her and Clydie, between a love with no foreseeable benefits and many complications and a love with tangible benefits and little responsibility (*JC* 234). Jayber faced a choice similar to the one Kalypso forced Odysseus to make between his marriage and home and the immortal pleasures of her island.<sup>31</sup> Jayber's car and his relationship with Clydie were the results of following a displaced love; instead of seeking to live out an accountable love for his place, he chose to obtain the mechanical power that would allow him to satisfy his desires elsewhere without incurring any corresponding obligation.

But Jayber, like Odysseus, finally chose to return home and follow the way of love. His moment of decision came one night when he and Clydie were dancing at a Christmas party. Jayber looked up in the middle of a dance to see Troy dancing with a woman Jayber did not recognize; Troy gave him "a wink and a grin, raising his hand to me with the thumb and forefinger joined in a circle" (*JC* 237). Troy's wink and gesture link him to the "wicked" man in Proverbs, who mischievously winks as he walks into evil, following the harlot to her house without realizing her way leads to hell (Prov. 6.13). Jayber's description of Troy as a man who "would turn up at a roadhouse dance with the

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<sup>31</sup> See Berry's reading of this section of the *Odyssey* in "The Body and the Earth" (*Unsettling* 124–30).

lips of a strange woman on his mind and a grin on his face” allows him to locate Troy’s destination precisely with his ironic question: “Where the hell did [Troy] think he was?” (*JC* 241). And yet Troy’s conspiratorial sign implicated Jayber in Troy’s failure to understand his place, and Jayber suddenly felt sick as he realized he might not be as different from Troy as he would like to believe. At that moment “the memory of Mattie as she had been on that day when I knew I loved her” came vividly into his mind (*JC* 238), and Jayber knew that he must choose according to this love. Just as Dante, in *Vita Nuova*, repented of his faithlessness to Beatrice after he had a “forte imaginazione” of her as he first saw her (*Vita* 39.1), so Jayber’s memory of his first love for Mattie spurred him to repent. He scrambled out of the bathroom window—squeezing unceremoniously out of the hellish dance hall much as Dante and Virgil squeezed out of the Inferno and into Purgatory—left a note for Clydie with the keys to his car, and forsook both as he walked back through the night to his home in Port William (*JC* 239). Because Mattie was “intact and clear within herself,” Jayber determined to order his life around her and the wisdom she embodied, and he hoped his right choice could somehow counteract Troy’s wrong choice: “What I needed to know, what I needed to become a man who knew, was that Mattie Chatham did not, by the terms of life in this world, have to have an unfaithful husband—that, by the same terms in the same world, she might have had a faithful one” (*JC* 241). Mattie’s presentation here as the antithesis of the foolish woman in Proverbs seems to link her with the personification of Wisdom in the early chapters of Proverbs, signaling her membership in the medieval tradition of Lady Philosophy or Dame Wisdom that developed from these passages and that also influenced Dante’s portrayal of Beatrice.<sup>32</sup> As Jayber walked along the dark road, coming to terms with his

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<sup>32</sup> Jayber’s descriptions of her elsewhere also follow the characterization of the virtuous woman in



rejection of Clydie and his desire to embrace the Wisdom that Mattie embodied, he slowly understood that if his hope was to be realized, he would have to be Mattie's husband, and so he vowed to, "in love's mystery and fear, . . . be her faithful husband from this day forward" (*JC* 243).

In the following chapter, titled "The Way of Love," Jayber attempts to describe how this vow of love changed his life. This is a difficult task for him because his love seemed to cause no concrete change for Mattie; as he asks, "What did love have to say to its own repeated failure to transform the world that it might yet redeem?" (*JC* 248–49). Jayber found he could understand the power of love better because his love for Mattie did not have the closure that a normal marriage would bring: "even if I had been in the usual way her husband, she would have remained beyond me. I could not have desired her enough. She was a living soul and could be loved forever. Like every living creature, she carried in her the presence of eternity" (*JC* 249). As the novel's epigraph, from Marvell's "The Definition of Love," declares, "Magnanimous Despair alone / Could show me so divine a thing." Because Jayber could not hope for his love for Mattie to be satisfied in time, he saw that love for any "living creature" carries the lover beyond time into the light of eternity in which the beloved properly belongs. Just as at the end of *Vita Nuova* Dante's unrequited love for Beatrice carried him to a place his intellect could not comprehend, to visions of ever-higher glory, so Jayber's love for Mattie, while it remained physical and earthly, led him to a divine love, a love that hoped for the redemption of the world and its creatures even as they remained broken.<sup>33</sup> So while

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Proverbs 31 (*JC* 189, 341).

<sup>33</sup> Regina Psaki, writing about Dante's relationship with Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, concurs with this reading of their love: "this love of Dante for Beatrice is salvific, and simultaneously erotic, as so

Jayber's love for Mattie remains erotic, it, like Dante's love for Beatrice, leads him toward heavenly love. Charles Singleton, commenting on the end of the *Vita Nuova*, expresses the simultaneous earthly and divine nature of Dante's love: "A troubadour's love would have seen only Beatrice, a saint's love would have sought only god" (77). His love, once purged of romantic fantasies, enabled Jayber to account more fully for Mattie because it forced him to recognize that she was beyond his understanding and so warranted his utmost care and faithfulness. And Jayber began to realize that he owed this same love—a love both physical and spiritual—to the rest of the creatures who shared his place.

As Jayber came to terms with this way of love, he finally discovered that he could pray Christ's Gethsemane prayer: "I took [prayer] up exactly where I had left off twenty years before, in doubt and hesitation, bewildered and unknowing what to say. 'Thy will be done,' I said" (*JC* 250). For while his questions about Scripture had only grown more intense, his submission to the way of love enabled him to see that his youthful mistake had been to ignore "the verses that say God loves the world" (*JC* 250). Jayber now read John 3:16 as one who stood by his place in love:

If God loved the world even *before* the event at Bethlehem, that meant He loved it as it was, with all its faults. . . . I imagined that [his] right name might be Father, and I imagined all that that name would imply: the love, the compassion, the taking offense, the disappointment, the anger, the bearing of wounds, the weeping of tears, the forgiveness, the suffering unto death. If love could force my own thoughts over the edge of the world and out of time, then could I not see how even divine omnipotence might by the force of its love be swayed down into the world? (*JC* 251)<sup>34</sup>

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many have noted regarding so many single textual loci. Not all sexual loves are salvific, but this exemplary salvific love between a man and a woman remains sexual" (14). Jayber follows Dante's lead, then, in understanding his love for Beatrice as both erotic and redemptive, which is consistent with Berry's rejection of a dualism between body and spirit.

<sup>34</sup> Berry repeats this reading of John 3:16 in an essay ("Christianity" 97).

This renewed understanding of God's love, predicated on his faithful love for Mattie, led Jayber to see that Christ's Gethsemane prayer perfectly indicated his commitment to his place in the order of Creation: "That He prayed the prayer at all showed how human He was. That He knew it could not be granted showed his divinity; that He prayed it anyhow showed His mortality, His mortal love of life that His death made immortal" (*JC* 253).

Finally able to sense the supreme propriety of Christ's prayer, Jayber understood that while this prayer might not transform his place, it might reorient himself in relation to his place. He discovered that sometimes during prayer, while he stands "knocking at a shut door, . . . the shut door opens and you go through it into the same world you were in before, in which you belong as you did not before" (*JC* 253). So Jayber found himself changed by his prayers; instead of desiring things around him to change, he decided, "'I will stand like a tree. . . and be in myself as I am.' And the things of Port William seemed to stand around me, in themselves as they were" (*JC* 254). Since Christ's love, displayed by his standing in his place to his death, redeemed the world, Jayber committed himself to this same love, a love that accounts for the eternal value of the beloved and so is willing to make any sacrifice to redeem the beloved.<sup>35</sup>

Jayber, having barely turned from the path Troy chose, the path that leads to hell, managed to orient himself according to the landmarks of biblical and Dantean wisdom and chose the way of love. This way led him to a clearer understanding of his proper place in the order of Creation and enabled him to stand and work there, to choose and act

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<sup>35</sup> In several of his novels and essays, Berry returns to the "extraordinary" power of simply "standing by somebody you love" even when one is helpless to minister any concrete aid (*Conversations* 193). One of the most poignant expressions of this is in *A Place on Earth* when Jack comes and sits by the widowed Hannah and her new baby; even in his awkwardness his presence offers her his freeing love (*A Place* 231–33).

according to a divine love for his fallen and yet redeemable context. As Jayber puts it, “My strange marriage (which not a soul on earth knew about but me) seemed to have placed me absolutely” (*JC* 259). Jayber’s statement here echoes Berry’s claim elsewhere that “[m]arriage takes love out of the mind and places it responsibly in the world” (“Poetry and Place” 173). So in spite of the increasing disintegration of his place—the new interstate drew more people away to bigger cities; good farmers and friends like Burley Coulter and Athey Keith died and left too few caring hands to continue their work; Troy and other big farmers sank deeper into debt and struggled to extract the profit they needed from their impoverished soil; new health regulations forced Jayber to close his barbershop because he did not have running water—Jayber remained committed to doing what he could to preserve Port William’s health. Many of the causes of Port William’s disintegration are external; as Berry writes elsewhere, “communities are destroyed both from within and from without: by internal disaffection and external exploitation” (“Sex” 125). While there is much that is beyond Jayber’s control, he can still choose to respond rightly to the realities of his place. Because of his steadfast love for Mattie and his place, near the end of his life Jayber is allowed to partake in the loving, natural order of the Nest Egg, which he calls “the greatest joy of my life” (*JC* 344), and which, following Dante, “is figured in [Eden,] the earthly paradise” (*Monarchia* 3.16).

When Dante enters the “ancient wood” at the top of Mount Purgatory (*Purgatorio* 28.23), he meets a lady, picking flowers, who tells him he has arrived at the “place chosen for nest of the human race,” a place given by God “as an earnest of eternal peace” (*Purgatorio* 28.77–78, 93).<sup>36</sup> Though the Garden of Eden is now “empty” because of

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<sup>36</sup> The lady picking flowers is named Matelda, and she leads Dante to Beatrice. Mattie does share some interesting similarities with Matelda: their names are similar; Matelda gathers flowers when Dante

Adam and Eve's fall (*Purgatorio* 32.31), Dante sees it as the place that embodies God's ideal plan for earth. Jayber found a similar Edenic order in the Nest Egg, which was Athey's name for "the fifty or so acres of big timber that [he] kept and protected" on the edge of his farm (*JC* 344). This name not only draws on Dante's designation of Eden as a nest, but also indicates the invaluable treasure that Athey knew this place preserved. In one of the novel's many lovely details, Jayber keeps "three or four hundred dollars stuck between the pages of an old copy of *Paradise Lost*" (*JC* 284), thus keeping his monetary nest egg in a book about the lost garden that was humanity's original nest egg. After Jayber moved from town to a little stilt house on the river, he walked to this stand of timber regularly, and his description of these undisturbed woods emphasizes their properly hierarchical order:

This was a many-storied place, starting under the ground with the dark forest of roots and the creatures of the dark. And then there were the dead leaves and the brilliant mosses and the mushrooms in their season. And next were the wildflowers and the ferns in their appointed places and times. . . And next were the low trees: ironwood, hornbeam, dogwood, and (in the openings made by fallen big trees) redbud. Above those, the big trees and the vines went up to the crown of foliage at the top. And at all these aboveground stories there was a moving and singing foliage of birds. Everywhere there were dens and holes and hollows and secret nests. . . . Everything there seemed to belong where it was. (*JC* 345–46)

Each living creature in this forest was in its place, and because nothing attempted to step out of place, a great abundance of life thrived here. Jayber came to the Nest Egg "to feel the change" this ordered place effected in him and to receive "a certain quietness of mind" (*JC* 346). One day, as he rested in the peace of the place, he saw Mattie walking

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meets her and Mattie is doing the same when Jayber sees her (*Purgatorio* 28.41; *JC* 198–99, 347); Matelda wakes Dante when he falls asleep in Eden like Mattie wakes Jayber from a nap in the Nest Egg (*Purgatorio* 32.72; *JC* 347). Matelda leads Dante to Beatrice, and Berry seems to have combined characteristics of both Matelda and Beatrice in his portrayal of Mattie as the one who leads Jayber toward a higher form of love.

along picking wildflowers (*JC* 347). He waved to her, and she came over and greeted him briefly; she sat down nearby and, “thus apart and together,” they watched the place (*JC* 348). For the next decade and a half, Jayber would see Mattie occasionally in the woods and they would walk or sit together, mostly in silence for, as Jayber writes, “The place spoke for us and was a kind of speech” (*JC* 349).

Jayber and Mattie came here to participate in a place in which the intended divine order persisted naturally. The lives here remained in their places and exemplified the beauty and fecundity that such placed living yields. This natural order convinced Jayber that, in spite of the many wrong turns he had taken, he too could participate in the wholeness God intends. As Jayber is able to declare after recounting some of his experiences with Mattie in the Nest Egg: “This is a book about Heaven. I know it now” (*JC* 351). One day, on his way home after walking with Mattie in the forest, Jayber saw a “brilliant” rainbow stretched across the sky (*JC* 352). This rainbow—like the one that announced Beatrice’s arrival in Eden (*Purgatorio* 29.76–78) and the first one God set in the sky after the flood as “the token of the covenant which I make between me and you, and every living creature” (Gen. 9.12)—confirmed to Jayber, as it did to Thoreau at the end of *Walden*, that the divine light still enters and redeems the dark and broken world.

Jayber needed this confirmation, for when Mattie grew sick and left the farm for the hospital, Troy took the opportunity to log the Nest Egg. When Jayber followed the sounds of chainsaws and bulldozers and witnessed the destruction, he felt in himself “the shaking of the fall of all things” (*JC* 361). Because Troy had already cut himself off from his place, once “its protector” Mattie left (*JC* 360), his displaced desire left him no reason not to reenact the original fall and destroy again the Edenic order. In his sorrow, Jayber

went to see Mattie in the hospital, and when Mattie saw him, she immediately realized the reason he had come: “Her eyes filled with tears, but she said quietly, ‘I could die in peace, I think, if the world was beautiful. To know it’s being ruined is hard’” (*JC* 363). Jayber, now crying, could not articulate his love for her, so he simply asked her, “‘But what about this other thing?’ She looked at me then. ‘Yes,’ she said. She held out her hand to me. She gave me the smile that I had never seen and will not see again in this world, and it covered me all over with light” (*JC* 363). In the midst of the destruction and loss caused by hubristic, displaced people working out their selfish desires, Jayber and Mattie affirm the simultaneous reality of the divine love that carries the promise of redemption.

Near the end of his story, Jayber tells a parable about The Man in the Well that brilliantly condenses the lostness of the world and the way of love he still chooses to follow. Jayber tells about a hunter who comes from the city on a beautiful Saturday to walk freely through the forest. But because this man is ignorant of the past—in which this wooded place had been inhabited by homesteads—and because he is “not looking where he is going,” he falls through an old abandoned well. So because of his inattentiveness to his tradition and his place, the path that he thought was one of “freedom” leads him to “his prison, perhaps his tomb” (*JC* 357). At the end of Jayber’s life, this is the darkness into which he believes Troy and much of his culture have fallen, and yet, because Jayber is “a man of faith” (*JC* 356), he continues to love in hope:

Listen. There is a light that includes our darkness, a day that shines down even on the clouds. A man of faith believes that the Man in the Well is not lost. He does not believe this easily or without pain, but he believes it. . . . He believes that those who make their bed in Hell are not lost, or those who dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, or the lame man at Bethesda

Pool, or Lazarus in the grave, or those who pray, ‘*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.*’

Have mercy. (*JC* 357)

So although he lives in a fallen place among lost people, Jayber chooses to follow Jesus’ command to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Watch and pray” (Mat. 26.41).<sup>37</sup> While his love and prayers may not transform his place—Troy still chooses to destroy the Nest Egg—Jayber hopes that perhaps by following Jesus’ example of steadfast love he can participate in the redemption of his place. And Jayber’s “Nunc Dimittis”—a reference to the grateful prayer that Simeon prayed after he saw the baby Jesus—is that after Troy lost the Keith farm, Jayber became Troy’s friend; he could love Troy, with all his faults, because “finally he was redeemed, in my eyes, by Mattie’s long-abiding love for him, as I myself had been by my love for her” (*JC* 361). These small redemptions are effected by love that accounts for the eternal value of other living creatures and determines to act in accordance with their incalculable value. And these advents of love, these glimpses of God’s salvation that brings light and glory, enable Jayber to “depart in peace” (Lk. 3.29–31). For as Berry concludes in his essay “Discipline and Hope,” it is when we remain attentively in our place—like Simeon in the temple and Christ in the garden—that we are open to the advent of divine redemption: “We can only wait here, where we are, in the world, obedient to its processes, patient in its taking away, faithful to its returns. And as much as we may know, and all that we deserve, of earthly paradise will come to us” (“Discipline” 151).

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<sup>37</sup> As Jayber explains about the attitude he learns late in his life, “I try not to let good things go by unnoticed” (323). In the context of his life on the river and his walks in the Nest Egg, Jayber describes his watching extensively (323-27, 349-51).



*Faithfully Working out Love*

While *Jayber Crow* elucidates Berry's way of love and the relation to tradition, place, and community to which it calls us, Jayber remains something of an outlier in Berry's fiction because of his atypical "marriage" to Mattie and his profession as a barber. A more representative example of a spouse and farmer who struggles to follow this hard way of love can be found in *The Memory of Old Jack*. The forms of marriage and farming are intertwined; as Berry claims, "[agriculture and marriage] tend to . . . be reciprocally defining: our demands upon the earth are determined by our ways of living with one another; our regard for one another is brought to light in our ways of using the earth" (*Unsettling* 131). This mutual influence is certainly evident in the life of Jack Beecham, the protagonist of *The Memory of Old Jack*. Jack's first love for his farm becomes misguided when he yields himself to the ambitions of Ruth, his insufficiently-loved wife, and only the difficult work of farming can eventually correct his affection and enable Jack to recommit himself to his land. Jack is never able to work out his affections for his wife, and as he learns through his marriage and through his affair with the widow Rose, human love remains incomplete apart from faithful work for the one loved. In both his marriage and his farming, Jack must work to learn how to make his love faithful and accountable. And while he learns some lessons too late to save his marriage, he does learn to enact his love for his land in a faithful work that enables him to participate in the order of his place. Only in the life of his neighbor and kinswoman Hannah Coulter, does Jack witness someone whose work faithfully and responsibly enacts her affection for both her family and her land.

Set in Berry's fictional community of Port William, *The Memory of Old Jack* takes place on a September day in 1952 when Jack Beecham looks back over his long

life. Through Jack's memories, Berry relates the story of Jack's life in his community. Jack grows up farming, and when he comes of age and his father dies, he takes over the work of his family's farm. Jack's parents leave the farm to several family members, so at first Jack only owns part of the farm. After working for five years as part owner and part tenant, Jack borrows money to buy out the absentee inheritors and commits his life to this one-hundred-and-fifty-acre piece of land. He sees his farm, at this point, with the eyes of a young lover: "What moved him then was a sense of the possibilities that lay yet untouched in his land. The rest of his own life seemed to him to lie there, unborn in the dark soil of the old farm" (*MOJ* 37). And because his name is now formally attached to this soil, he works to fulfill his obligations to the history and life of his place:

[A]fter the full responsibility of it fell to him, he saw it with a new clarity. . . . The work satisfied something deeper in him than his own desire. . . . When he stepped into the first opening furrow of a new season he was not merely fulfilling an economic necessity; he was answering the summons of an immemorial kinship; he was shaping a passage by which an ancient vision might pass once again into the ground.

He remembers those days for their order, the comeliness of the shape his work made in each one of them as it passed. (*MOJ* 38)

Jack's work here seems ideal: he loves his farm, working it not just to make money but because he desires to participate faithfully in an "immemorial kinship" his ancestors established with this land, and his work is comely, enhancing the life and health of his place. So while he is young and unproven by time and difficulty, Jack begins working well, in affection and fidelity to his place.

But Jack's work in his land cannot satisfy all his affections: on Saturday nights he washes up and goes to neighborhood dances. While this temporarily satisfies his desire for company and women, he does not meet anyone at these dances to whom he wants to commit himself and his work. One Sunday, however, Jack attends church as a sort of

“uneasy compensation for the extravagances of Saturday night” (*MOJ* 42). As he sits in his pew, hearing the sermon only vaguely while delighting in the beauty of the day and the congregation, Jack’s attention is drawn to an unfamiliar head in front of him, “as beautiful a head, surely, as he will ever see” (*MOJ* 44). For the rest of the service, Jack watches this head and its “rich” hair, waiting for the benediction when the face belonging to the hair will turn toward him. He is not disappointed. When the young woman turns, Jack studies her, and when he leaves church that day, “[t]he face and body of this strange girl have so entered his mind that from head to foot he feels luminous and light with the thought of her” (*MOJ* 46). Jack’s affection now focuses on this woman, and when he sees her again at church the next week, his mind turns “from aspiration to labor” (*MOJ* 48). Unlike his farm, which he grew up on and whose possibilities he knows well, Jack begins working for this woman in an ignorant love, a love not yet forced to confront the actuality of its object in daily life and work.

Jack manages to meet this woman, Ruth Lightwood, and they begin courting, but their relationship develops on a poor foundation: “He won her with his vices, she accepted him as a sort of ‘mission field,’ and it was the great disaster of both their lives. . . . She was bound to him by a vision of him that she held above him—that he, in fact, neither understood nor aspired to; and he was bound to her by a vision of her that she would discover, by her own lights, to be beneath her” (*MOJ* 51). They manage to get engaged without ever confronting the gap between their perceptions and reality; they do not love each other but only unrealizable possibilities they imagine in each other. Jack can never be happy as the prosperous, city businessman or gentleman farmer that Ruth envisions. Ruth can never be happy as the country farm wife that Jack envisions.

Because their visions do not align with reality, no amount of work can ever hope to realize them. Their courtship never forces their affection to go to work, so their love remains abstract and deceived: “[Jack] was misled not by Ruth but by his own desire, so strong for her that it saw possibilities that did not exist, and believed in what it saw. And Ruth . . . too was misled, by him, by his foolish willingness to win her by indulging her misconceptions” (*MOJ* 53). Once they find themselves married, the work of everyday life soon undeceives their affections, and their marriage becomes an affectionless obligation. The work of their marriage reveals the distance between their visions of each other and their individual actuality, but unfortunately, it exposes these flawed visions only after they commit themselves to each other.

No good work seems possible in this marriage. This becomes evident first in their sexual failures: Ruth does not desire Jack as he desires her; rather, she is repulsed by his hands that grasp “whatever filth or dirt or blood” his farm work requires (*MOJ* 57). She allows, permits, and is “victimized” by Jack’s desire, but she cannot “welcome” him (*MOJ* 59, 58). This sexual difference underscores their other differences. Ruth attempts to change Jack, to make him cleaner and ambitious, but her “disapproval . . . [forces] him to cease to be simply what he was, and to become defiantly so” (*MOJ* 58). Their marriage becomes a place of frustration and estrangement as neither of them can become the imagined spouse for which the other one works. Because the affections of Jack and Ruth do not align with reality, because they each work for imagined possibilities in their spouse and not for the actual person to whom they are married, their work does not benefit one another. Like a farmer trying to grow coconuts in Kentucky, they have desired what is impossible and their failure to realign their affections with reality marks

the failure of their marriage. There is a tragic symmetry, then, in the stillbirth of their first child; the barrenness of their marriage simply reflects the barrenness of their faithfulness in the absence of love.

The bleak fidelity of his marriage leads Jack to seek affection elsewhere, but the first two places he turns prove just as inimical to good work as his barren marriage and so also prevent him from enacting an affectionate vision for the object of his work. Jack, prodded by Ruth's ambition, first breaks faith with his farm and buys an adjoining piece of land. Jack's promiscuous desire for more land follows the unfaithful logic of Ruth's ambition: "that no place may be sufficient to itself, but must lead to another place, and that all places must finally lead to money; that a man's work must lead not to the health of his family and the respect of his neighbors but to the market place, to that deference that strangers yield to sufficient cash" (*MOJ* 65). Bereft of fidelity to his place, his work no longer chiefly desires the intricate health of his land but now offers its allegiance simply to the Beecham's bank account. Berry's narrator describes Jack's shift in amorous terms: "He was learning a new desire. . . . Like the 'strange woman' whose delights were so carefully understood by Solomon, this new place . . . possessed as much of his consciousness as might stray from his work; it kept him awake at night" (*MOJ* 67). In seeking to change himself to gain Ruth's affection, Jack breaks faith with his farm, no longer working for its harmonious "life and health."

As a consequence of Jack's infidelity to his land, he has to hire someone to help with the additional work his extra land requires. By hiring someone who of necessity will have no formal obligation to the land, Jack invites his farm hand to work outside the discipline of fidelity. Jack finds a hard, conscientious worker, Will Wells, and Will

seems to be able to do good work alongside Jack, even in the absence of any formal commitment to the object of his work. Will even improves the place on Jack's land in which he and his family live: "Working at odd times, . . . Will had elaborated around his little house the design of a neat homestead. . . . Except that it was not his place, except that he had to hold himself answerable to Jack, he was at home there" (*MOJ* 79–80). His care for the place he lives sets Will apart from Jack's neighbor's hired hand, Lightning Berlew. Lightning and his wife are "travelers": "Though the two of them live and work on the place, they have no connection with it, no interest in it, no hope from it. They live, and appear content to live, from hand to mouth in the world of merchandise, connected to it by daily money, poorly earned" (*MOJ* 204, 16). Compared to Lightning, Will does good work; Will has a genuine affection for the land and works hard to rightly participate in its order. But because he has no formal bond with this piece of land, Will's work remains crucially separated from Jack's work and from the best possible human work: "A vast difference lived between them even while they worked together—the difference between hopeful and hopeless work" (*MOJ* 84). This lack of hope makes Will's connection to the land and to Jack too shallow to maintain his good work: "It was in the work itself, not in anything that the work came from or led to, that [Jack and Will] made the terms and the comfort of their comradeship" (*MOJ* 78). Because Will's work lacks the proper context, because his affection for the land has no formal fidelity, because the work itself is all he shares with Jack and not "anything that the work came from or led to," Will's good work is tenuous. Will's interest in and affection for his work on Jack's land gradually lessens because of "his knowledge that his labor formalized and preserved no bond between him and the place; he was a man laboring for no more than his

existence” (*MOJ* 81). This difference between Jack’s formal bond with the land and Will’s temporary connection finally becomes “too great” (*MOJ* 80). So when Jack and Will fight one day while working together, the break between them is “final”; Will leaves, unable to continue to work affectionately for the good of a place to which he has no lasting commitment (*MOJ* 84).

While working with Will, Jack realizes the need for one’s affection for a piece of land to be worked out within the context of fidelity. When Will leaves, Jack cannot bring himself to hire another man to work land to which he would have no obligation. At the end of the year, Jack sells the extra land he had bought and recommits himself to his original one hundred and fifty acres. He lost money on the sale, and when his barn burns down with some of his stock still inside, Jack has to go deeply into debt. Yet at this lowest moment, watching smoke rise from the charred timbers of his barn, Jack’s renewed fidelity to his farm anchors him: “He . . . stand[s] as completely and finally where he is as a tree. . . . A quietness has come over Jack. He knows that he is damaged. He knows that he is looking at what may be his ruin. . . . But he has come to the depths of a strange quietness in himself as he stands there on the verge of his ruin, breathing the air” (*MOJ* 91–2). Like a tree, Jack accepts the obligation he has to his land, and he commits to working for the good of his farm and to enacting his affection for the harmonies of the earth within this bond.

Even as Jack returns his affections for the health of the earth to the limits of his bond with his farm, the lack of affection in his marriage leads him to betray his commitment to his bond with Ruth. And just as Jack has to learn through hardship that good work on the land is not possible outside the limits of his commitment to his farm, so

he learns painfully that his desire for a loving relationship with a woman cannot be enacted outside the limits of faithful marriage. Jack is starved, though, for affection as he and Ruth have grown increasingly separate after he sold the adjacent farm and Ruth realized her ambitions would remain forever frustrated. Jack has met a young widow, Rose McInnis, who lives nearby, and both of them have an unfulfilled desire for love. As Berry's narrator explains in describing their mutual attraction, "That there was great desire, that she bore toward him the hunger for which he hungered, there is no doubt" (*MOJ* 128). One day Jack stops and speaks to Rose while she is working in her garden, and that night he comes to visit her. Rose accepts Jack as Ruth never will: "She knew him as he was, and loved him. He was naked before her and was not ashamed. . . . He worked through the long days, eager for the night to fall" (*MOJ* 131). Her unconditional affection fulfills Jack's desire in ways that Ruth's love, as long as it remains qualified by her vision of him that he cannot attain, never will.

Rose's love initially imparts new joy and meaning to Jack's work: "Rose had restored his life, . . . she had reached with her honest, eager hands and touched and revived that energy, that wild joy in him, that Ruth had all but destroyed with her fastidiousness and her shame. He would care for Rose. He would care for the workings of the dark and the ground that she had newly alerted him to" (*MOJ* 132). Like Will's work, however, Jack and Rose's love cannot thrive for long outside the disciplines of a faithful bond. When Ruth learns of Jack's infidelity, she confronts him, and as Jack sees the pain he has given her, he, "in the fierce justice of their bond, [bears] the wound he had given her":

After that he was torn. He felt the insult and shame that he had given Ruth, and he felt it, he knew, because he cared for her, because he would



be forever yearning and grieving after the loss of what perhaps they never could have had. And with Rose too he was beginning to feel an incompleteness. His love for her led to nothing, could lead to nothing. . . . It was as though he bore for these two women the two halves of an irreparably divided love. With Ruth, his work had led to no good love. With Rose, his love led to no work. . . . [H]e felt more and more the futility and uselessness of being out of place; there was nothing at all that he could do to justify or redeem or safeguard Rose's gift. (*MOJ* 134)

In his infidelity to his marriage, just as in his infidelity to his farm, Jack again acutely realizes the need for love to be disciplined by fidelity in order for it to be enacted.

Without the formal bond of marriage with Rose, Jack has no way to work out his love for her; he cannot share a vision and place with her and work alongside her to act out their mutual affection. And in the absence of love between him and Ruth, Jack is unable to hope for and share a harmonious life with her. Because his affection remains separate from his fidelity, Jack remains frustrated and unable to do good work with either woman.

Jack and Rose's relationship continues, however, until Rose's house burns, with Rose inside. Jack is devastated, and while this fire has clear parallels to the fire that burns down his barn—both occur after Jack breaks faith—unlike the barn fire that led him to recommit himself to his land, Rose's death does not drive him to renew his commitment with Ruth. Rather, Jack withdraws into sorrow, allowing his work on the farm to consume him: "In the years following Rose McInnis's death he labored in darkness" (*MOJ* 157). His work becomes drudgery because he has no human love to work for, because "[h]e no longer had a vision to lighten and justify his toil" (*MOJ* 158). Jack's hopeless work on his farm in the absence of a loving marriage emphasizes the interconnections Berry sees between marriage and farming, between human-human relations and human-earth relations: when Jack absorbs Ruth's ambition, he no longer faithfully enacts his love for his farm; in the continued absence of Ruth's affection,

Jack's work on his farm lacks pleasure and meaning. Given these interdependent relations, doing truly good work becomes complex and difficult, as one must seek to work well in all areas of life.

But even as his troubled marriage harms Jack's work on his farm, Jack's faithful work on his land, after he recommits himself to its health, not only contributes to the life of his land but also improves Ruth's life and the life of their marriage, although Jack and Ruth remain unable to adequately love each other. When Jack finally pays off his mortgage and is set free from the fear of ruin, he sees his land with new vision: "Clear and whole before him now he sees the object of his faith as he has not seen it for fifteen years. And he feels opening in himself the stillness of a mown field, such a peace as he has never known. . . . He has been faithful to his land. . . . And that hard faith has restored his vision at last and given him peace" (*MOJ* 160). And Jack now makes this inward peace, the peace gained by hard, faithful work even in the absence of pleasure, "visible . . . in his place":

[H]e saw that under the oppression of his darkness and his long struggle the farm had grown stark. . . . Wherever he looked he saw the need for remedies and repairs, and he felt the satisfaction he would take in those attentions. . . . [He would] turn his effort with redoubled care in upon the land that was rightfully his, not because it belonged to him so much as because, by the expenditure of history and work, he belonged to it. (*MOJ* 164)

His fidelity to his farm restores his affection for it, and now his "healing" work restores "the health of his place" (*MOJ* 165). While Jack failed to find love when he broke faith, first to his farm and then to his wife, his submission to the hard discipline of fidelity renews his youthful love for his place. And while Jack and Ruth cannot likewise gain affection for each other—"It was too late. . . . [for them to unite] farm and household and

marriage bed”—Jack’s work in their place does give his wife pleasure: “He saw in Ruth’s face certain softenings of pleasure at what he had done. He knew that he was making her life more agreeable, and he was glad” (*MOJ* 165–66). Through good work on his farm, Jack enacts what affection remains in his marriage; as a failure of affection or fidelity in one sphere of relations harms the work done in other spheres, good work done in one sphere contributes to the health of other spheres.

Jack is never able to harmoniously unite his marriage and farm, though, and this failure is his “tragedy” (*MOJ* 166). But as Jack has learned the need to work on his farm affectionately and faithfully through his relationships with Ruth and Rose, so in the life of a third woman, his neighbor and kinswoman Hannah Coulter, Jack witnesses good work being done in “farm and household and marriage bed.” Hannah, like Jack, has known great loss, but through the perseverance of her affection and faithful work, she participates in the harmonious life of her farm and household. Hannah’s first husband died in World War II, and the daughter she conceived from this marriage never saw her father. When *The Memory of Old Jack* takes place, Hannah has remarried and is pregnant with her third child.<sup>38</sup> Having experienced life’s joys and pains, births and deaths, Hannah “has learned by loss what it is she has. Her beauty now is the grace of her knowledge, a moving, level candor in her eyes. She has accepted the gift of mortality, loving a man’s mortal love and her own given in return, her womb filled with a

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<sup>38</sup> Janet Goodrich argues that in her pregnancy, Hannah “is equated with nature as ‘full with the season, heavy with yield’” (68). Goodrich makes this claim because she sees all the central women in the novel as typifying various conceptions of the earth. I argue that, rather than seeing these women as representing the earth’s feminine identity, Berry’s novel depicts these female characters in different relational attitudes toward the earth and toward Jack, offering different possibilities for relational bonds. Goodrich seems to recognize this when she writes about the women’s differing “attitudes toward the earth,” but then she claims that women like Hannah “typify Berry’s conception of the earth as an essentially feminine entity,” and this confusion in her analysis remains unresolved (65). For my argument that Berry does not link women and the earth in such a simplistic, troubling way, see “The Eros of Cupid and Child.”

life that the earth will inherit” (*MOJ* 194). From this acceptance of life’s pattern, which includes mortality as surely as it includes life, she and Nathan, her second husband, work to enact their deep love for each other, their children, their community, and their land.

And their good work realizes their affectionate vision for their place:

[W]hile they have been living in [their place] they have labored at its renewal. . . . There are still plenty of eyesores; there is still plenty of work to be done, plenty to be desired. But the disorder is only in appearance—visible perhaps to a stranger’s eye, but not to Hannah’s, who knows the deeper order of intention and labor. As long as she and Nathan are here and able to work there will be order, if not in sight, then within reach. (*MOJ* 98)

This foreseen order gives their work meaning and pleasure in spite of difficulties and pain: “Against all that they cannot foresee, against all dread, this is what entices and excites her and hurries her on” (*MOJ* 99). Hannah and Nathan faithfully love their place and work hard to contribute to its harmonious order. They work with an accurate vision of their place, a vision that sees its limitations but also its real possibilities, and their fidelity to their place provides hope that their work may enact their good vision. In Berry’s more recent novel *Hannah Coulter* (2004), Hannah herself looks back over her life and reflects on all that has gone into the development of her and Nathan’s mature vision: the loving example of their ancestors, the help of the other members of their community, the corrections of loss and failure, gratitude for God’s good gifts, faithful work in their fields, household, and family. While Jack is never able to unite his farming and his marriage, never able fully to intertwine his good work for both, Hannah’s good work gives him hope even as it highlights his shortcomings: “She is what he has failed. She is his consolation and his despair” (*MOJ* 103–4). And Hannah’s affectionate,

faithful work that participates in “the life and health of the world” exemplifies the work Berry considers to be good.

This vision of morally good work may seem halcyon and unattainable. As Berry himself points out, work and pleasure, fidelity and love have been divorced in our industrialized and consumer-driven culture. Our economy depends on workers who mass-produce shoddy objects for people with whom they have no connection and who live in far-flung, disparate places. In this economy, the workers get little pleasure from their work because they do not love the objects or recipients of their work, and the workers never have to correct their vision of their work because they have no faithful bond to the communities their work either benefits or harms. These same conditions increasingly exist in contemporary human relationships and marriages: if spouses find their loves are not easily worked out, they are more likely to look for new relationships than to attempt to correct their loves in the work of faithful marriage. The same unfaithful, counterfeit love is evident in American religious life and indeed nearly every aspect of contemporary culture. Berry clearly recognizes how far American culture has moved from the disciplines he upholds, but he argues that our culture cannot simply dismiss the moral framework these traditional forms preserve. Good work, according to Berry, will only be done from love and in the discipline of a humble fidelity. This good work may look different in a twenty-first century industrialized economy than in the rural 1950s economy portrayed in *The Memory of Old Jack*, but if work cannot faithfully enact an affection for its objects, then Berry suggests the work is not good and will not lead to health, but may well cause harm. Love in marriage may be worked out differently now than in the marriages Berry depicts, but it must still be worked out. Affection for the land

may be reified differently, but if an affectionate vision is not instantiated through faithful work, then Berry suggests it will not be realized at all.

By making the health of the earth and its ecological communities the standard by which human work is judged, Berry rejects the Puritan dualism that led them and their descendents to see financial success as the measure of good work. Instead of this too-simple standard, Berry makes our work responsible to a host of difficult questions. To paraphrase the questions Berry asks in “Going to Work”: How might I help my spouse and household to live in a healthier way? How might my relations with my community be made more harmonious? How might I contribute to the health of my place and the land around me? These questions may be quite difficult to work out in the situations many people today find themselves, and while Berry grapples with these difficulties, he continues to rest his hope “on the willingness of good people to do the right thing now. . . [G]ood work, faithfulness, willingness to serve, honesty, peaceableness, and lovingkindness will support hope” (“Hunting” 223). As long as individuals find ways to work out affectionate visions under the discipline of fidelity—through practices as simple as growing a garden (“Think” 81–84)—Berry will find reason to hope. For when people work within faithfully kept promises, their work becomes accountable to its effects and the health it either contributes to or damages. To apply the conclusion of one of Berry’s essays to this context, “when we promise in love and awe and fear . . . [w]e give up the romanticism of progress, that is always shifting its terms to fit its occasions. We are [working] where we stand, and we shall stand afterwards in the presence of what we have [worked]” (“Standing” 62). If the work is done well, if it is done by people who

faithfully love the place in which they work, then the work will make a more healthy place.

*Living on Heaven's Bottom Rung*

Berry's way of love describes a form, a process, by which our love may be made accountable to the needs of the other creatures who share God's gift of life with us. In his writings he articulates an "elaborate understanding of charity" that proposes practical means by which to begin participating in the Kingdom of God now ("Gift" 273), a goal that the original Puritan settlers might recognize as congruent with their desire to establish a "citty upon the hill." At the end of his essay "God and Country," Berry refers to these settlers and their perception of themselves as God's chosen people, seeing this belief as dangerous and yet potentially salvific:

It is presumptuous, personally and historically, to assume that one is part of a 'saving remnant.' One had better doubt that one deserves such a distinction, and had better understand that there may, after all, be nothing left to save. Even so, if one wishes to save anything not protected by the present economy—topsoil, groves of old trees, the possibility of the goodness or health of anything, even the economic relevance of the biblical tradition—one is a part of a remnant, and a dwindling remnant too, though not without hope, and not without the necessary instructions, the most pertinent of which, perhaps, is this, also from Revelation: 'Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.' ("God" 102)<sup>39</sup>

With this biblical reference, Berry returns to the conclusion of *Jayber Crow*, where Jayber is left attentively waiting for God's redemption, like Simeon in the temple and Jesus in Gethsemane. It is from this place of hopeful, prayerful watching that Berry calls

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<sup>39</sup> In the epigraph of *Another Turn of the Crank*, Berry cites a related biblical passage: "For we are left but a few of many. Jeremiah 42:2."

us to enter the way of love, to imagine the health of our places and to enact and correct this vision through faithful work.

In one of his Sabbath poems, Berry shows what it might look like to consider oneself part of a saving remnant called to watch for and participate in God's redemption (*Leavings* 61). At the beginning of the poem he denies that he is one of the "chosen few" or the "elect," claiming only to be "one whose foot / is on the bottom rung" of Heaven's ladder (6-7). And yet he declares his faith that "Heaven's / bottom rung is Heaven" (8-9), that this ladder is standing on the place

where I work  
by day and at night sleep  
with my head upon a stone. (11-13)

With these concluding lines, Berry, like the American Puritans, connects himself with Israel, and yet he is much clearer than they were about the link between heaven and earth, between spiritual ends and physical means. By embracing the earth as Heaven's bottom rung, and therefore as able to participate in Heaven itself, Berry demonstrates his commitment to care for God's gift of life—he works by day—and yet his recognition that this gift will not be saved or redeemed by his work—he sleeps at night. Berry's work always remains an expression of his love and gratitude for God's gift; it is his way of watching and praying for the advent of God's redemption. Like Thoreau who wanted to be a watchman "watching for the glory of God," or Muir who saw himself as a John the Baptist declaring the redemptive beauty of God's glacial gospel, or Cather's priests who garden and minister obediently in the hope of participating in the Incarnation's reconciliation, Berry's way of love is his vision of how humans can participate as priests in the wild and marvelous created order that Cotton Mather called "a temple of God."



## CHAPTER SIX

### Untangling the Roots

Sometimes a lost man will be so beside himself that he will not have sense enough to trace back his own tracks in the snow.

—Thoreau, *HMJ* 7: 109

The four authors in this study are not alone in their conviction that God remains active in creation and that humans ought to relinquish their selfish ends to participate in his wild ecology. Other contemporary literary artists from Annie Dillard to Mary Oliver to Marilynne Robinson share this vision. Even writers like Gary Snyder, Leslie Marmon Silko, or David James Duncan, who situate themselves outside of the Christian tradition, remain convinced that a religious perspective is needed for Americans to learn to care for their ecological communities.<sup>1</sup> But the four authors examined in this dissertation work out these basic insights with remarkable creativity and diversity, and their writings demonstrate how Americans from different regions and times have adapted their Christian traditions to meet contemporary ecological needs.

Each of these four authors—and most, if not all, of the others mentioned above—share an important point of agreement: humans need to submit to a divine moral order. They interpret the Genesis account of the fall as a warning against human arrogance. Adam and Eve fell, damaging both themselves and their ecological community, by

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<sup>1</sup> Silko's *Ceremony* shows her deep concern with Native American spirituality; Gary Snyder was raised as an atheist before turning to Buddhism for its inclusive ethics (Bilbro, "Helping People" 434); David James Duncan addresses religion in his fiction and essays, perhaps most explicitly in *God Laughs and Plays: Churchless Sermons in Response to the Preachments of the Fundamentalist Right*. See Gatta for other members of what he calls "the spiritual renaissance unfolding in present-day environmental literature" (*Making* 200).

setting themselves up as gods, by wanting to determine good and evil for themselves. As Muir declares, “Lord Man” must not think that the other creatures were made for him but should rather consider how “the Lord has taken the pains” to make every creature in his “family” (*Writings* 1: 343, 356, 324). Their common interpretation of the fall leads all four authors to articulate a divine economy in opposition to a human economy. From Thoreau’s lengthy “Economy” chapter in *Walden* to Berry’s definition of “the Kingdom of God” as the economy that “includes everything” (“Two Economies” 55), they all recognize that if people are going to treat the natural world differently, they must first value it differently—value it as God values it and not for how it can be useful to them. The core issue is, what is the currency of the world? Is it greenbacks or God’s glory? All of them agree, then, on the need for humans to pay attention to and participate in God’s ongoing redemptive work in creation.

Yet despite this broad agreement, the differences among these authors may be just as important for the different ecological ethics to which they lead. Attentive readers will have realized this, wondering how Muir’s belief that God can be experienced most fully in primitive wild places can be reconciled with Cather’s vision of harmonious gardening in which humans intimately contribute to God’s redemptive work. This difference stems from their understanding of how humans ought to participate in God’s economy, and it reveals two poles within the American religious ecological imagination: grace and works, worship and action. While all four authors agree that both these components are needed, they emphasize them to different degrees and so imagine different ecological ethics.

Thoreau and Muir focus on God’s wild order independent of humans, and they call their readers to be attentive, worshipful recipients of the divine grace given through

God's creation. Their ecological ethics, then, call for people to enjoy and protect wild places and to order their lives around the values revealed in relatively wild ecologies. Humans are priests called to be lead worshipers and to facilitate the worship rendered by other creatures. The greatest ecological threat they saw was heedless deforestation—at the rate that Americans are cutting down trees, Thoreau quipped, “we shall all be obliged to let our beards grow . . . , if only to hide the nakedness of the land and make a sylvan appearance” (*MW* 154), and Muir cites this passage in “American Forests” to mourn that the destruction has only increased (*Writings* 6: 384). Yet while both emphasize the need to protect the remaining pieces of wilderness, they also imagine other ways that humans might participate in God's wild order. Thoreau begins to work out how humans can use other creatures more gratefully in his discussion of the double meaning of “enjoy,” and he hopes that human use might be predicated on delight. Muir gestures to how humans should care for less wild nature when he imagines people planting “geranium slips in broken cups” (“Tuolumne” 488). Both, however, emphasize the “grace” pole and so conceive humans as primarily responsible for protecting God's works in order to notice and enjoy them; humans should be, as Thoreau puts it, “watchmen . . . watching for the glory of God” (*PJ* 4: 315; 2/1/52).

Cather and Berry, on the other hand, are worried that attentive watching may not be enough. So while they also urge humans to reorder their system of values so they can appreciate the ends toward which God orders all creation, they imagine this resulting in more active forms of participation. Thus they warn against the temptation to be like gods as well as the equally dangerous temptation for humans to act as merely another species of animal. Perhaps because they witnessed the immense exploitative power of modern

technology—tragically evinced in the World Wars that figure prominently in their novels—Cather and Berry urge their readers to take more active roles in both stopping this destruction and healing the damage it has caused. Characters like Crazy Ivar and the youthful Athey Keith, who stood by while the hog butchers succumbed to drink, may not be as obviously destructive as individuals like Troy Chatham, but they will not contribute to the redemption of their communities unless they learn to take a more active role. They imagine the priestly role, then, in more embodied, practical ways and are concerned with gardening, agriculture, and sustaining human cultures. They supplement their focus on the need for human action with their attention to the way that tradition and community should act as checks on individuals who are tempted to work toward their own ends rather than God's. Both Cather and Berry draw on Jesus' example in Gethsemane to suggest that attentive submission is always the precondition for active participation in God's redemption. But as Jesus, after his submission to his Father's will, went on to accomplish redemption through his passion, so human priests have the responsibility to first submit to God's ecological order and then learn how to participate in caring for its health. This is an imaginative vision filled with tension and paradox: Can Americans see themselves neither as the elect who are entitled to boundless material prosperity, nor as hopelessly fallen and in need of untainted wild creation to redeem them? Can they live, rather, with the humility of the fallen and the confidence of the redeemed? This is the difficult call of Gethsemane.

Regardless of how actively they imagine the human participation in God's wild order, all these authors agree that humans are not the source of restoration or redemption. Rather than believing that they have the knowledge and ability to fix what's wrong with

the ecology in which they live, these authors take a more humble view of humanity's role. Like priests who serve the Eucharist, humans can never be the source of ecological redemption but can only hope to serve God's redemptive work. Like Jayber, their "Nunc Dimittis" is that as they prayerfully watch and work, the advent of God's redemption may come.

The differences among these authors demonstrate the way that America's Christian tradition can continue to draw creatively on its theological resources to respond to changing cultural conditions. As Berry argues, rather than jettisoning this tradition as too badly damaged, "[a] better possibility is that this, our native religion, should survive and renew itself so that it may become as largely and truly instructive as we need it to be" ("Christianity" 96). Indeed, as Buell and McKibben both point out, America remains a deeply "religiocentric" culture (Buell, *Emerson* 160), and its hopes for learning to care for its ecological communities likely rest on its ability to find Christian reasons to do so: "for the foreseeable future this will be a 'Christian' nation. The question is, what kind of Christian nation?" (McKibben, "Christian Paradox"). My hope is that this study may help us to, as Thoreau puts it, "trace back [our] own tracks in the snow" and come to understand where we are by understanding where we have been.

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