

Creation, Localism, and Appetite in the Garden World of Wendell Berry

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A sense of place is central to the work of fidelity. This is the contention of Walter Brueggemann in his book *The Land*, and it is the germ of an emergent Christian localism.¹ An energetic, unwieldy coalition of social, economic, and ideological impulses, localism in its various forms settles around a thick notion of place. In the special sense invoked here, *place* implies the rooted, particular meanings and conditions and communities native to any given vicinity, over and against an abstract notion of empty, neutral space. A Christian localism, then, seeks and celebrates thick places in its sacred texts, its particular histories, and its native ways of life.

The marriage of Christianity and localism is not conceptually inevitable: after all, “foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58).² There has always been a universalizing and expansive moment in the Christian gospel that militates against rooted particularism. To the extent that a Christian localist outlook coheres, though, it does so around two projects.

The first is a critique of the “dominion” language in Genesis 1, or of the triumphalist interpretation thereof that has been marshalled to authorize human exploitation of the natural world and, indeed mistakenly, to dualize “man” and “nature.”³

The second project of Christian localism, and its best gift to the larger movement, is its effort to recover “the art of being creatures.”⁴

Biblical teachings on creation lay out a creaturely economy in which humanity is placed—that is, charged with a given vocation, bound with given promises, and yoked among given creatures whose natures also unfold within this economy. A paradigmatic instance of this is the prominence of soil in the Eden narrative: soil mingles with the life and death of every creature living from, on, and in it, minutely specific to place. Eden’s soil is the substrate of the human placed therein, and this soil mediates most of the promises and relationships that define the human’s vocation. This emphasis on creatureliness throws into relief human dependence and interdependence, as God’s dust and God’s wind in a world not of our making and scarce of our knowing.

This last point, the creaturely limits of human knowledge, is especially salient to the larger localist movement. Localism implies social and economic formations, yes, but beyond that it suggests an epistemology, a way of knowing and making knowledge. The insight begins with a welcome reminder that local stores of knowledge are worth attending to, and makes the further point that *all knowledge is local*. All knowledge is produced within communities, often imagined communities, and organized around local interests and meanings and hierarchies. As Brueggemann puts it, “There are no meanings apart from roots.”⁵ Various trajectories of critical theory arrived at the social construction of knowledge long before Christian localism did, of course, but a Christian perspective redirects the idea away from nihilism and toward humility, mystery, a willingness to rest in uncertainty and unfolding.

As a social movement, localism did not germinate in the church, but Christianity is central to the thought of localism’s visionary poet prophet, Wendell Berry, and the overtly biblical localism that has appeared in the past decade owes much to Berry’s impressive corpus of poetry, fiction, and cultural criticism amassed over five decades

and counting. Berry directly addresses biblical creation narratives in his essay “God and Country.” If his reading of the Eden narrative seems predictable, that is only because it has been so widely adopted since it was written in 1988. He argues that Adam and Eve were not given the earth as entitlement, but as gift and obligation. His watchwords are “service, stewardship, and the responsible care of property belonging to another,” and he quotes Hugh Nibley’s observation that “man’s dominion is a call to service, not a license to exterminate.”⁶ Berry invokes the ancient law of usufruct, the right to temporarily enjoy the fruits of land belonging to another so long as the property remains undamaged. It’s a useful discussion, but uncharacteristically for Berry, it avoids the hard questions, both textual and ecological. Does Eve’s bite from the fruit violate the law of usufruct? It seems not. Where, then, is the sin? Are humans permitted to alter the appearance or function of landscape or organism for purely aesthetic reasons, if it seems to leave the ecosystem unharmed? What about special attempts to protect landscapes that particularly appeal to humans instead of those that do not, as in the national park system? What constitutes “damage” to the land, since any change to an ecosystem will harm some species and benefit others? Whose welfare prevails?

The nature of this damage is the theme taken up in Berry’s poem of the same name; this is the text I intend to bring into dialogue with Genesis 2–3. The poem makes no specific reference to the Eden tale, but its themes are deeply related, and in my view “Damage” is Berry’s more interesting treatment of our text. The poem is an account of Berry’s attempt to convert a wooded, waterless hillside into a pasture by clearing trees and creating a pond. The hillside is his Eden, given to him in its particular form, magnificently indifferent to his cattle’s need for water and grass. Berry wants to alter it. He hires a man with a bulldozer to clear trees and dig earth; water seeps into the gash; Berry reseeds the hillside “to heal the exposed ground.” His desire and his self-deception allow him to believe that grass and clover can mitigate the erosive effects of the bulldozer. After a “wet fall,”

[t]he ground grew heavy with water, and soft.

The earthwork slumped; a large slice of the woods floor on the upper side slipped down into the pond.

His Eden falls. He convicts himself: the trouble is “too much power, too little / knowledge. The fault was mine.” The poem concludes in reflection on the question of environmental damage: as both nature poet and farmer, Berry is forced by these dual roles to exploit his subject for his livelihood:

If I have damaged my subject, then I have damaged my art. What aspired to be whole has met damage face to face, and has come away wounded. . . .

To lose the scar of knowledge is to renew the wound.⁷

Soil, trees, creature, appetite, technology, fall, sin: these are the load-bearing themes of the Genesis narrative as well, and the two texts suggest themselves as interlocutors.

Beyond thematic kinship, the texts share a particular blurriness, a thematic uncertainty at the center of the drama. For Berry, the blind spot occurs at the nexus of technology and appetite: the bulldozer is the proximate cause of the scarred hillside; Berry’s own appetite for pasture is the ultimate cause—or so it would seem. But the poem’s concluding stanzas spin off into a series of misdirections: the real cause is the degradation of local culture, or the real cause is the machine’s artificial multiplication of human power, or the real cause is confusion of tools with weapons. In the end, the poem hesitates doubtfully between these undertheorized alternatives, leaving uncertain the nature of the collusion between human technology and human appetite in Berry’s fallen Eden.

For its part, the Genesis narrative harbors a tree-shaped textual gap of its own, namely, the nature of the tree of knowledge and the character of the knowledge it confers. At the center of Yahweh's garden stands what Ellen Davis has called "The Tree of Ambiguous Wisdom"; as Davis observes, the narrative itself seems uninterested in limning the tree or guiding the reader's interpretive response.⁸ What sort of knowledge does it bestow on the woman who eats? Esoteric wisdom, sexual knowledge, moral law, consilient knowledge, as E. O. Wilson terms the demystifying knowledge products of science? On this matter the text is silent, yet the reader's understanding of the events that follow—the rupture and dislocation, the introduction of technology, the changes in human nature and vocation—depends on the meaning of the tree of knowledge.

The structuring design of this paper, and the burden of its argument, is that the two texts inform one another, each opening a view into the particular blind spot of the other. Where Genesis is silent on the nature of knowledge, "Damage" draws out the local, experiential nature of the knowledge conferred by fallen earth. Where "Damage" obscures the intersection of human appetite and technology, Genesis observes the instrumentalizing collusion between consumption and construction.

To the latter first. Berry's "Damage" begins with hunger: his cattle's hunger for grass, his own hunger for cattle. A pasture is wanted, but on his steep hillside no pasture is given. What is given—timber, soil, slope—is of no use for pasturing cattle. Berry thus finds himself in the position of the woman in Eden: surrounded by the fruits of a garden freely given, but filled with appetite only for what is not. For Eve, appetite obscures the intrinsic nature of the desired object and projects instead a scrim of imagined gratification: "And the woman saw that the tree was good *for eating* and that it was lust *to the eyes* and the tree was lovely *to look at*, and she took of its fruit and ate" (Genesis 3:6, emphasis added). The tree of knowledge is itself a creature of Yahweh, possessing intrinsic qualities and vocation independent of human appetite, but the woman sees it only through a lens of desire and imagined consumption: the tree is not good, but good for eating; not lovely, but lovely to look at.

As it was for Eve, so it must have been for Berry, gazing at his dry wooded hillside and seeing only water for drinking and clover for eating. Yet the poem is silent on Berry's own hunger for pasture, his original whim. It falls to Genesis to point up the two farmers' hungry self-absorption, their assumption that the world is conveniently available. Blinded by appetite, they fail to grasp the wisdom of Thoreau: "This curious world we inhabit is more wonderful than convenient; more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used."⁹

The bracing lesson implicit in Eve's experience, namely, that the world exists in its own right and independent of human purposes, is braided through the length of the Old Testament because it is inscribed in ancient Israel's most elemental identity, its relationship to land. Of the Israelite practice of land sabbath, Berry observes, "Looking at their fallowed fields, the people are to be reminded that the land is theirs only by gift; it exists in its own right, and does not begin or end with any human purpose."¹⁰ Even when understood, the lesson is not easy to live. Eve's hungry gaze beams from all human eyes. The remedy is to re-*place*: that is, to reroot ourselves in thick place, and to replace gaze with contemplation. In the words of George Grant, contemplation is the *place*-ing of the eye, a "wondering, marveling, being amazed or astonished, beyond all bargains and conveniences."¹¹

If "Damage" attends too little to the culpability of Berry's own appetite for pasture, it attends too much to his reliance on technology. Technology is a vexed category in Berry's work, indispensable to the agrarian community he loves yet implicated in that community's economic and ecological decline. In "Damage" he enlists a notion of proportionate scale to set necessary technological limits: only tools that require no more than the faculties proper to a human body are permitted. He cites William Blake: "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings."

The solution is attractive in its appeal to the body as the most basic given of human experience, witness to our particularity and our creaturely dependence. But it falls apart under the weight of the poem's moral logic. If Berry had used man-powered shovels to dig the pond with his neighbors instead of a bulldozer, would the damaged earth still have fallen? Yes, probably. Shovels themselves multiply the power proper to the human body with leverage; furthermore, they require extrahuman power in their fabrication.

Berry needs a more coherent treatment of the problem of technology, its origin and its limits. Our Genesis text suggests a possibility, in its characteristically elliptical way. This second creation narrative, in contrast to the first, portrays creation as a manual labor of making and manipulating materials, a meaning that Alter captures in the term *fashion*:

The Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. . . .
And the Lord God fashioned from the wild each beast of the field and each fowl. . . . And the Lord God built the rib that he had taken from the human into a woman. (Genesis 2:7, 19, 22)

Yahweh is a craftsman, an artisan, but curiously the text mentions no tools. He uses existing materials but only the faculties of his own personage. This maker takes Berry's principle of *sola soma* to its fulfillment: all techne, no technology. Tools appear in Eden first in the hands of the humans, immediately following their meal of forbidden fruit: "And the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths" (Genesis 3:7). This passage is commonly understood to comment on shame or a civilizing process, but at least as interesting here is the appearance of technology, the needle and the cutting tool implied in the act of sewing. What interests me here is the sequence: desiring, consuming, knowing, and making. The humans figuratively remake the given world in a fantasy of availability, they consume the desired object, they know, and with their new knowledge they physically remake a world suddenly replete with tools and inert material. The anxiety and dislocation the humans experience after they eat the fruit, the self-deception and blame-dodging, the alienation that distorts their relationships to the soil and its creatures: all these may be read as bitter sequel to humanity's technological turn. They turn away from the given world and toward a world of their own making.

Relevant to this sequential instrumentalization is the work of theologian David Schindler, which develops a concept of a "technological ontology." Schindler's work focuses on post-Enlightenment modernity, but the process he describes is prefigured in Genesis. For Schindler, technology does not primarily consist in the made objects themselves; indeed, "it is the essence of the technological worldview that it perceives technology more or less simply as the sum of the things that are made . . . and that it then begins to assess these only in terms of how they are used."¹² This, to return now to Berry, is the first error in "Damage," recognizing as technology only the bulldozer instead of his own instrumental worldview, an ontology that is merely realized by the machine.

Properly understood, "a technological logic, or ordering intelligence," Schindler continues, "can be said to consist in . . . the conflation of knowing and making." Schindler relies here on the work of George Grant, the mid-century Canadian philosopher. Grant shows that "the modern West has ever-more pervasively conflated knowing—that is, conflated the human being's original presence to and in the world— with making. Missing from this presence-as-making, we may anticipate with our own terms, is an anterior sense of presence-as-being-given: of being, ours and the world's, as gift."¹³ Schindler continues: the "technological approach to knowledge has transformed that world into . . . something that is always yet to acquire its worth through its being-used or being-available-for-manipulation."¹⁴

Here, then, is the biblical text's gift to Berry: recognition that the instrumentalizing drive to make, not the nature of the tool, is the beginning of technology's corruption of creaturely relationships. Adam stitches leaves into loincloths, surely a harmless exploitation in itself. But the process inaugurates a human mode of encounter with the world as available, usable, and manipulable: the world as empty space rather than morally meaningful place. So totalizing is this technological ontology that Berry fails to recognize it in himself, blinded by the bulldozer. It is Berry's own appetite for pasture and his will to make what is not given that cause the earth to fall.

Such is the hard lesson of Genesis for Wendell Berry. Now it is Berry's turn to teach: what wisdom does "Damage" offer the Genesis narrative? The question circles around the tree of knowledge. The tree is cynosure and cypher at the center of the text: irresistibly present, intractably resistant to interpretation. No doubt I tread dangerously in hazarding a reading of my own.

We find the beginning of Berry's wisdom in a persistent theme running through his work: the limit to human understanding, a limit he experiences as a grace. Fritz Oehlschlaeger summarizes Berry's view thus: "If we . . . see mystery only as a kind of intolerable limit to our certainties, to our mastery of the world, then we will never be led into the slow revealing of what is to come, now and beyond. The foreclosure of mystery in favor of universal certainty—particularly as evidenced by E. O. Wilson in *Consilience*—is what Berry takes aim at."¹⁵ Berry was an early articulator of the epistemology that has rooted deeply in the localist movement: the view that knowledge is local, not general; limited, not expansive; placed, not unified; contingent, not objective. His critique of overweening "consilient"—that is, totalizing, quantifiable—knowledge has transmogrified in some quarters of localism into an unfortunate and, in my view, unwarranted suspicion of science.

A more interesting direction to take this strand of Berry's thought is mapped in "Damage." The poem introduces another term into his epistemology: *subject*. This is gentle wordplay. He uses the word at line level to mean the great subject or topic of his lifetime of writing, namely, the agrarian landscapes and communities of his native Kentucky—his thick place. Where he once thought of his writing as an escape from the world,

I am no longer able to think that way. That is because I now live in my subject. My subject is my place in the world, and I live in my place.

There is a sense in which I no longer "go to work." If I live in my place, which is my subject, then I am "at" my work even when I am not working.

But as the passage continues, the subject of his writing opens into a wider notion of subject as self:

If I live in my subject, then writing about it cannot "free" me of it or "get it out of my system." When I am finished writing, I can only return to what I have been writing about.

Indeed, we are never free of subjectivity: our biases and blindness, our appetite and ego circumscribe the horizons of our knowledge. Our knowledge is local because our subject is placed. This suggests the modesty proper to human knowledge. If our subject is placed, our fantasies of autonomy and omnipotence are gutted: we find ourselves enmeshed in and thus vulnerable to the totality of the given world. A sparrow falls; an earthwork falls; two naked farmers in a garden fall. As Berry puts it:

If I have damaged my subject, then I have damaged my art. What aspired to be whole has met damage face to face, and has come away wounded.

For Berry, this insight is sobering but not devastating. He continues:

It accepts the clarification of pain, and concerns itself with healing. It cultivates the scar that is the course of time and nature over damage: the landmark and mindmark that is the notation of a limit.

To lose the scar of knowledge is to renew the wound.

An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars. Here, then, is Berry's gift to Adam and Eve: a damaged map of a scarred

land. When they leave the garden, they enter a "geography of scars"; Adam must work to "cultivate [this] scar that is the course of time and nature over damage." When they leave the garden, Adam and Eve, like Berry, will live in their subject, and thus live thickly in their place: subject to local meanings and local limits, subject to the givenness of place. When Adam sweats, he will seek shade under the tree of scarred knowledge, "the landmark and mindmark that is the notation of a limit."

Where, then, do these narratives lead us? Each text fills an emptiness at the center of the other: we learn from Genesis that the tool-in-mind, an instrumentalizing appetite to transform the world for our use, precedes the tool-in-hand; we learn from Berry that the tree of knowledge marks the limitation of human understanding. Taken together, does this fullness merely lead to a counsel of despair? Is there escape from the collusion of human appetite and technological ontology that locks us into an instrumentalizing relationship with the world? Are we consigned by our natures to ever re-create our environment in the projected image of our own fantasies, and thus to live always in a closed system of exploitation and disappointment?

The texts themselves do not answer these questions. Instead, I offer in conclusion two passages that gesture toward a route forward. Schindler writes:

It is crucial to understand, however, that the instrumental character of things follows ontologically from what is always already their inherently given truth and goodness and beauty, *because it is the nature of the good to share itself*. The instrumentality of nature, in other words, can never be taken legitimately to mean that things in their natural givenness are merely "brute facts," awaiting the simply utilitarian meaning that is to be assigned them, now arbitrarily, by human beings. The necessary and legitimate instrumentality of nature, in a word, must be seen from within, and as a sign and expression of, what is the intrinsic or transcendental truth and goodness and beauty of things qua created and thus given: as a sign and expression, indeed, of things' basic liturgical and covenantal meaning in relation to God.¹⁶

It is the nature of the good to share itself. The inherent goodness of creation, a notion carried over from the first cosmogony of Genesis, means that natural world not only has intrinsic value and purpose, but *offers that essence to the human mind in a gesture of covenant relationality*. The creatureliness of the world itself, bearing as it does the imprint of the Creator in its very sovereignty, invites us to partake. Emmanuel Levinas gets at something similar when he writes:

We live from "good soup," air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. . . . These are not objects of representations. *We live from them*. Nor is what we live from a "means of life," as the pen is a means with respect to the letter it permits us to write—nor a goal of life, as communication is the goal of the letter. The things we live from are not tools, nor even implements, in the Heideggerian sense of the term. Their

existence is not exhausted by the utilitarian schematism that delineates them as having the existence of hammers, needles, or machines. They are always in a certain measure—and even the hammers, needles, and machines are—objects of enjoyment, presenting themselves to “taste,” already adorned, embellished. Moreover, whereas the recourse to the instrument implies finality and indicates a dependence with regard to the other, living from . . . delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness, which is the original pattern of all independence.¹⁷

Consistent with Schindler’s suggestion, Levinas finds that the world—including the human-built entities in that world—“presents itself” to human perception as a gift of inherent beauty and happiness, independent from its utilitarian function. To this Levinas adds an insightful distinction between “living off of” and “living from” our place. To *live off of* the earth is to exhaust the meaning of its existence in service of our own ends. To *live from* the “good soup” or good soil of the world, in contrast, is to recognize the delight-in-existence of the hundreds of entities sharing the world with us at every moment in time: even the papers, the telephone, the scissors, and the keyboard that offer themselves to my perception at this moment are pregnant with goodness and tendering partnership with my hands.

Here perhaps is hope for the humans in Eden. Yes, the technological ontology, the tool-in-mind, always threatens to reduce human knowing to making and acting upon, to resolve all flesh into the old question “Who, whom?” Human knowing is itself inescapably partial, biased, scarred, positioned. Yet this need not consign us, like a Sisyphian blacksmith, to an eternity of frantically fabricating the bars that imprison our own minds. The fruit that the humans eat and the leaves they stitch, if Schindler and Levinas are right, present themselves, with their inherent qualities and purposes, as potential partners to the humans in the cosmic dance of time. If the humans lay *consecrated* hands on the fruit, or the shovel, or, yes, even the bulldozer, hands that know their own creatureliness and honor the creatureliness of the world they encounter, then the gesture is not instrumental but covenantal. The earth and all its good soil fall not downward but outward, toward place, encounter, and relationship.

NOTES

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

2. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004). Alter’s translation is used throughout.

3.

See Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973), 18–30.

4. Norman Wirzba, “The Art of Being a Creature,” in *The Gift of Creation: Images from Scripture and Earth* (Sikeston, MO: Acclaim Press, 2009).

5. Brueggemann, *Land*, 4.

6. Wendell Berry, “God and Country,” in *What Are People For? Essays* (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1990), 99.

7. Berry, "Damage," in *What Are People For?*, 5–7.

8.

Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30–31

9.

Henry David Thoreau, 1837 Harvard commencement speech, quoted in Fritz Oehlschlaeger, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry*: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 38–39.

10. Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Berkeley: North Point, 1981), 271.

11.

George Grant, quoted in David L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 279.

12. Schindler, *Ordering Love*, 279.

13. Quoted in Schindler, *Ordering Love*, 277–78.

14. Schindler, *Ordering Love*, 278.

15. Oehlschlaeger, *Achievement of Wendell Berry*, 82.

16. Schindler, *Ordering Love*, 9.

17.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 100.