

ABSTRACT

Re-Membering Home:
Wendell Berry's Response to the Gnostic Abstraction of Place

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The modern world is by and large in a cultural crisis of displacement. This is allowed for by gnostic tendencies that place the entire vale of home in the abstract qualities of it and disregard the worth of particular places. Wendell Berry's fiction shows a counter to this. Grounded in firmly fixed communities running generations deep, his stories show how the cultivation of place breeds affection and attachment to it in the midst of a cultural current that offers no explanation of or defense for homes. The physicality of place matters as it interacts and leads upward to spiritual realities. This is seen in the love of Hannah Coulter, the faith of Jayber Crow, and the hope of Andy Catlett, given to their place and given to them through their place. In these ways places, and especially homes, have sacramental value with the ability to lift one upward to the ultimate and final Home.

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WENDELL BERRY'S RESPONSE TO THE Gnostic ABSTRACTION OF PLACE

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PREFACE

“Persons attempting to find a ‘text’ in this book will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a ‘subtext’ in it will be banished; persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise ‘understand’ it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers.”¹

Given this order, it is with fear and trembling that I approach my subject. Berry’s fiction has given me a framework for understanding something that very few other things have, specifically: why home matters. It is my hope that this thesis presents this framework of understanding, but it is not, by any means, intended to stand in for Berry’s work. He can say what he has to say much better than I can explain what he says, so I recommend anyone who reads this thesis read the stories that I am writing about (preferably *before* reading my thesis). They are rich and complex and, most importantly, beautiful. Furthermore, a story can do what no essay can. Where an essay explains, a story—at least a good one—exhorts.

That being said, I do hope that what I present here will help illuminate a problem in the way people think about home, and show that this problem is not inconsequential. This thesis is not a stand-in or substitute for Berry’s stories, but I do think it has something to offer.

¹¹ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2000), note.

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For Dad and Mom,
Who gave me a home to love.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Wendell Berry is an essayist, novelist, poet, and farmer from Northern Kentucky. From the early 1960's he has advocated for independent farming and against the threats of the industrialization of farming. All of his work—writing, farming, and speaking—is affected by his love of and dependence on his home in Henry County, Kentucky. The strong sense of place in his fiction comes from his own personal realization of its intrinsic worth in a person's life. Berry's friend, Gene Logsdon, said that Berry "combines a devotion to the art of writing with a devotion to the art of farming and is a credit to himself and to all of us both ways."¹ Wallace Stegner tells Berry in a letter he wrote to him, "your writing is a by-product of your living."² Indeed, Berry sees his occupation as a farmer and as a writer as inextricably intertwined, each dependent on and enriched by the other. In his words, "I believe I can say properly that my fiction originates in part in actual experience of an actual place."³ Berry has lived in the same place almost all his life, and his family has roots that run five generations deep in that place. He is, as he would say, a part of its "Membership." Consequently, it has a strong influence on his life and work. His fiction, especially, has a strong sense of place and home, and in his writing he seeks to rectify a lost sense of the goods that these bring.

¹ Gene Logsdon, "Wendell Berry: Agrarian Artist." *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*. Ed. Peters, Jason (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 248.

² Wallace Stegner, "Wendell Berry: A Placed Person." *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Nathan Schlueter, Mark T. Mitchell (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011), 6.

³ Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place*, (Berkeley California: Counterpoint Press, 2010), 4.

Because of the interworking between Berry's life and his written work, home becomes a major component in his fiction. He falls in line with an age-old literary motif of return, and his dedication to place helps readers see the good of returning. As characters return home to a particular place of belonging, Berry counters the tendency to divide the physical aspects of home from its spiritual realities. This in turn provides the Christian with a right view of what home is and should be this side of eternity.

Homecoming Motif

Berry places himself within the long-standing tradition in Western literature that makes use of the homecoming motif. From Homer to Wordsworth and beyond, writers have woven stories around the desire in all people to return to a place of belonging. Following in this tradition, Wendell Berry creates fiction that beautifully illustrates the goods of home within a modern context that is becoming increasingly detached from particular places. Gnosticism, as it separates the physical from the spiritual, leads to this separation. Berry shows through his fiction the good of reuniting these two realms and revalues the particular place of home.

Most story structures involve conflict and conflict resolution and their plots center around this story arc. In homecoming stories, the conflict derives from the character's separation from home and resolves with his return. Take for instance, Homer's *Odyssey*. One of the oldest and most integral works of the Western Tradition, the *Odyssey* is a clear example of a homecoming story. The *Odyssey* does not begin with the character being cast out, but instead, Odysseus has already begun his homecoming journey when the epic begins. The rising action is his journey home, and because of the intrusion of suitors,

Odysseus is faced with the double challenge of not only reaching home but also reclaiming it. In almost every (if not all) homecoming motif stories, a major element is identity. Fused with the loss of home is always a loss of identity, in some way or another. This is true of Odysseus as well. When he first arrives on the island of Ithaca, Athena comes to Odysseus and disguises him as a beggar. His recovery of identity is wrapped up in regaining his home. Before he ultimately reveals himself, however, his friends and family recognize him. When Odysseus first returns to the palace, his dog recognizes him. Likewise, his nurse, Eurycleia, the woman who brought him up from childhood, recognizes him because of a scar on his leg. These events underscore that Odysseus belongs. The place and the components of the place know him. The climax of the story comes when Odysseus fights to regain his home, and upon doing so, Athena removes his disguise. The recovery of home and the recovery of identity go hand in hand. The *Odyssey* clearly shows a deep longing in man for something that only home can fulfill and the deep connection between who a person is and where he belongs.

Another well-known homecoming story is that of the Prodigal Son. Contrary to Odysseus, the Prodigal Son actively rejects home. In so doing, he also has a loss of identity. In rejecting home, he rejects his family and tradition—his story. His physical detachment from his place also caused an emotional and spiritual detachment from his identity. Interestingly, the Prodigal Son realizes and accepts his change of identity: “Father,” the Prodigal Son says, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”⁴ The father, however, forgives him and embraces him

⁴ *The Holy Bible*. English Standard Version. (Wheaton, Illinois: Good News Publishers, 2007), Luke 15:21.

once again as his son. Home, as we saw in the example of Odysseus, restores identity. In coming home the Prodigal Son's place and identity are reconnected.

Finally, William Wordsworth also uses the homecoming motif in his poem, "Michael." Nuanced within the poem are the themes of place and identity, inseparably linked and binding the heritage of the family together. Unlike the previously mentioned homecoming stories, Wordsworth's character does not return home. There is not a resolution of return, making the story a tragedy. It is the story of a father's wish for his son to succeed him. Michael is a humble sheep farmer whose deepest desire in life is to pass his land and occupation to his son. When he has to sell half of his farm to cover his nephew's debt it is a major disappointment, but he decides to send his son away, for a period, in hopes that his son can make enough money to buy back that portion of the farm. His son does not return, however, and so when Michael dies the farm must be sold to a stranger. Berry marks this story as a distinct break from traditional Western literature saying that, "'Michael' is a sort of cultural watershed. It carries on the theme of return that goes back to the beginnings of Western culture, but that return now is only a desire and a memory; in the poem it fails to happen."⁵

Homecoming stories such as these resonate deeply held human longings both generally and in particular. They identify with readers generally because mankind is estranged from his home and in particular because all desire a specific place to call home. God created the world and then put Adam and Eve in a particular place; a place that was meant to be their home for them to work in and play in, to cultivate and have dominion

⁵ Wendell Berry, "The Work of Local Culture," in *What Are People For*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 162.

over, and “it was good.”⁶ Here in this garden of bliss, God freely walked and communed with them. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were cast out from the perfect home that was created for them, and thereby successive humans were estranged from this idyllic home as well. Thus, humans, as a race, are on the journey back home, and each story of homecoming is a small shadow of the ultimate homecoming that all deeply desire. Since Eden, any idea or realization of home in this world has been, to varying degrees, an incomplete version of Eden.

In particular, homecoming stories matter because each has a particular desire for a home here on earth, in the most present and immediate sense. There are common ideas about what home should be: a place of belonging, shelter, love, etc. Some people know these things and have experienced them in varying degrees, while others are more familiar with the lack of them; they only have the sense that their home is *not* what it should be because it is missing these elements. Yet at the core of both of these is a presumption and an innate knowledge about the true nature of home. There are different ways of describing these intangible aspects of home, and there is no shortage of quips to do so: “love is what makes a house a home,” “home is where the heart is,” sometimes even attributing it to a person: “home is wherever I’m with you.” An empty building can never be a home. There are abstract elements to home and no one doubts that these are necessary. These elements, however, have to reside somewhere. Perhaps it is true that “love is what makes a house a home” but without the physical house one is only left with love, abstract and detached from particularity; the house itself is a necessary component of the equation. In fact, in many homecoming narratives, the conflict derives from the separation of the abstract elements from the concrete setting and the story resolves when

⁶ Genesis 1.

these two are reunited. The tension of the story is derived from a disparity between person and place. In these stories the homes are more than symbolic; the places themselves matter. Odysseus must return to a specific place: Ithaca. For the Prodigal Son, his father does not go out to find his son, his son returns home, to a physical place. His physical return is, indeed, symbolic of a spiritual return, but it is, just as importantly, also physical.

A Displaced Culture

As Berry notes, Western literary tradition has seen a break in succession, like that depicted in Wordsworth's "Michael." The reason for this is that there has been a gradual, defining shift in the cultural attitude towards home, and it has led to a culture of displacement. People are leaving home for other things, other goods even, without ever considering the costs. A lot of factors have attributed to this, but Gnosticism has definitely paved the way. This ideology values spiritual realities but views the physical world at best as something we do not really know what to do with, and at worst as something inherently evil. While Gnosticism is not directly driving people away from home, it does make an allowance for it. Berry says of his grandfather,

He did not participate in the least in what we call 'mobility.' He died, after eighty-two years, in the same spot he was born in. He was probably in his sixties when he made the one longish trip of his life. He went with my father southward across Kentucky and into Tennessee. On their return, my father asked him what he thought of their journey. He replied: "Well, sir, I've looked with all the eyes I've got, and I wouldn't trade the field behind my barn for every inch I've seen."⁷

Many—arguably most—people today cannot agree with his sentiment. People are leaving their homes for something else and Gnosticism deceives them into thinking this

⁷ Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012). ProQuest Ebook Central, 17.

does not matter. Berry, in employing the homecoming motif in his own stories, has a double challenge. He must, like writers before him, restore his characters to home. In addition to this he must also convince readers that the restoration is, in fact, desirable. He must both remind why homecoming stories resonate and instruct readers in the value of being particularly placed.

This thesis will explore the effects that Gnosticism has had on the understanding of home and how Berry's fiction stands in direct contrast to it. The separation of the physical from the spiritual is an ancient Gnostic tendency that still infiltrates many of the ways people think. This infiltration has had profound implications on the common understanding of home. Berry's fiction, with firmly placed characters that find their identity in a Membership transcending themselves, stands in strong contrast to the Gnostic view. *Hannah Coulter* shows the value of the community of the place and how it springs from immediate need. In *Jayber Crow* Berry illustrates the necessity and beauty of work and how care cultivates affection for a place. Finally, through his character Andy Catlett, Berry gives an image of hope that, likewise, grows out of the place. In all of these instances place and home matter, and Berry shows the inherent good that these things hold. Berry's fiction counters a Gnostic understanding of home by re-valuing particular places and reminding the Christian of his proper relation to the given world.

CHAPTER TWO

Against Gnosticism

Introduction

The biblical narrative clearly shows that God’s people are called to a particular place. God placed Adam and Eve in a particular garden, and the curse of the fall necessitated their removal from this place. The Israelites traveled to a particular Promise Land. Their journey to this promised land can be seen as a metaphor for the Christian’s journey to heaven, but this ought not to preclude the reality that the Promise Land is a real, particular place. Likewise, the command to “love your neighbor”¹ is place-based. Neighbor implies spatial relation. This command acknowledges and declares man’s finitude. One is confined to a particular place and called to love the people of that place because she is finite; she is not omnipresent and neither is her love. This calls to question the cultural trend towards spatial transience, not only within the secular world, but the Christian culture as well. As Wilfred M. McClay and Ted V. McAllister note in the preface to *Why Place Matters*,

To say that ‘place’ matters is, to some extent, to swim against the principal currents of our times. The globalization of commerce, and the technologies of communication and transportation that have made the globalization possible, make it so easy to move people and products, ideas and styles, that it sometimes seems as if the world is in fact becoming placeless.²

¹ Matthew 19:19

² Wilfred M. McClay and Ted V. McAllister, “Preface,” *Why Place Matters*. New York: New Atlantis Books, 2014, ix.

The ever-shifting world makes the ability to abide—not in a spiritual sense, but in a very real and present physical sense—ever more difficult. And this is not without its costs.

McClay and McAllister continue: “Whether we like it or not, we are corporeal beings, grounded in the particular, in the finite conditions of our embodiment, our creatureliness.”³ Place matters. Yet increasingly, the promise of greater mobility and the potential that comes with it seems to remove people from their places. McClay’s introduction gives further reasoning for the displacement:

As we have become ever more mobile and more connected and absorbed in a panoply of things that are not immediately present to us, our actual and tangible places seem less and less important to us, more and more transient or provisional or interchangeable or even disposable. The pain of parting becomes less, precisely because there is so little reason to invest oneself in ‘place’ to begin with.⁴

The disconnect from places forces one into a mentality of spatial abstractness. A spiritual understanding of place is valued but not a physical one. Because particular places are no longer a reality, neither is the love of place. Home is abstracted from physical place and understood as only a spiritual reality. “I know that many in our transient culture like to talk about home in terms of people,” says Jennifer Trafton, “. . .and I certainly don’t deny that family and community are inseparable from the concept. But it is precisely the *placeness* of home that I am interested in: the incarnate reality of it, the dirt and the roof and the bones of it. My deep longing is rooted in earth.”⁵ This longing should not be surprising since man was formed out of the earth. In this article, Trafton mourns the loss (the sale) of her childhood home. She defines home as “sanctuary and story intersecting

³ McClay and McAllister, “Preface,” ix.

⁴ Wilfred M. McClay, “Introduction,” *Why Place Matters*, 4-5.

⁵ Jennifer Trafton, “In the Light of Home.” *The Rabbit Room* (blog), February 2, 2016. <http://rabbitroom.com/2016/02/in-the-light-of-home/>.

at a single point.”⁶ The “single point” is a particular place and this component should not be taken out of the equation. When it is taken out it leads to such phrases as “Home is where the heart is” or “Home is wherever I’m with you.” These sentiments are strongly upheld and affirmed within Christianity. The question is then, how did something as strong and bulwark as orthodox Christianity lend itself to such Hall-mark sentimentality? I argue that it primarily resides in a Gnostic rendering of the world that separates the spiritual and physical aspects of life. It is precisely this Gnosticism of place that Wendell Berry counters in his fiction.

In this chapter I will first briefly look at the history of Gnosticism and how it was rebutted in its earliest forms. From there, I will show that Gnostic tendencies did not die out, but rather still continue to affect much of Christian thought today. These Gnostic tendencies have worked their way into an understanding of place and home. Finally, I will show how this deeply affects the way people understand heaven.

Gnosticism: Roots and Effects

The term Gnosticism in itself is ambiguous. It comes from the Greek word *gnōstikos* which means “knowing” or “knowledgeable.”⁷ Yet what exactly is meant by Gnosticism can vary.⁸ An original Gnostic belief system held to an idea of creation very different from the Christian view, yet the implications of this narrative lead to certain ideas that can be traced up to some modern-day Christian thought. It is my aim to briefly

⁶ Trafton, “In the Light of Home.”

⁷ Birger A. Pearson. *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 9.

⁸ *Ibid*, 8-9.

look at the original Gnostic ideas, in order to understand the beliefs that came out of that and that still affect the ways Christians think about the world today.

Burger A. Pearson categorizes Gnosticism not as a Christian heresy, but rather a separate religion with roots in Platonic Hellenism that weaved its way into Christian ideas.⁹ That is, the heresy of Gnosticism that Irenaeus would refute was only a strain of a wider school of thought and not confined to the Christian religion alone. Gnostic beliefs were mapped onto a pre-existing Judeo-Christian understanding of God and creation. Yet, as Irenaeus would note, it ruptured what is at the very core of Christian belief.

The Gnostic view of creation generates a divide between the physical and spiritual world that is akin to Plato's beliefs in the Forms. The general belief of the Gnostics is that the world exists in a series of hierarchical realms, of which earth is the lowest. This leads to a complex theory of creation in which the physical world is created not by the supreme God of the highest realm, but rather by the Demiurge, which is in the realm beneath him. This necessarily creates a strong division between the spiritual realm and the earthly one. This explanation of creation leads Gnostics to view the material world as inherently inferior to the spiritual, creating a strong division between the two. As Wilson McLachlan says, "There is a wide cleavage between the heavenly and the earthly regions." This deeply defines the way that Gnostics think about the material world. Within the spiritual realm "dwells the transcendent God," explains McLachlan, "remote from the material world with its corruption, and this is also the true abode of the soul,

⁹ Pearson. *Ancient Gnosticism*., 8-9.

which has been banished or has fallen into this world of sense and matter... a fundamental conviction is that the world, the body, flesh, matter, all are evil.”¹⁰

This division is reminiscent of Plato’s divided line, where the material world is separated from true reality and the Forms of the Good. He uses the well-known analogy of the cave to illustrate reality. Earth is like a cave where the things that one knows are merely shadows of the real forms. Certain people, with the right knowledge, learn to turn away from the wall of the cave and ascend to the real world where they see the true forms of all that exists. The root word for Gnosticism is, as mentioned, *gnōstikos* which translates as “knowing.” Like in Plato’s analogy, Gnostics believed that one ascends to the spiritual realm through enlightenment or knowledge.

Christian Counter to Gnosticism

These ideas, however, are contrary to Christian orthodoxy. Irenaeus vehemently attacked the Gnostic belief system. He formed the core of his arguments around the reality of the incarnation. If all physical matter is inherently bad, then God becoming man is necessarily problematic. The Gnostics circumvented this problem by holding that Jesus was not really a physical man, but he only appeared to have assumed flesh. This cuts to the core of Christian doctrine and renders the death of Christ useless and consequently redemption invalid. Irenaeus rightly rejected the Gnostic narrative of creation, the strong divide between the physical and the spiritual, and the preeminence of knowledge as an ascent to the divine, and held true to the orthodox belief that “the Word became flesh.”

¹⁰ Wilson, R. McLachlan. *The Gnostic Problem: A Study of the Relations between Hellenistic Judaism and the Gnostic Heresy* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1958), 70.

The Gnostic divide between the spiritual and the physical is rooted in a mistaken view of the created world. For the Gnostic, the created world is inherently evil. Christian orthodoxy holds that nothing is inherently evil; evil is not a positive force, but rather a distortion or, as Augustine says, a privation of the good. Creation, then, is not evil; God pronounced creation good, as Augustine says, “All things that exist, therefore, seeing that the Creator of them all is supremely good, are themselves good.”¹¹ However, creation *is* fallen. A complete distrust in material things is an over-correction for the depravity of the world. This understanding unifies the physical and spiritual realms, where Gnosticism separates them.

Unlike the Gnostic, the Christian realizes the shortcoming of knowledge as a means of ascent, and he instead relies on grace. First, because, as Irenaeus says, one can never arrive at complete knowledge. “We are inferior to...the Word of God and His Spirit, [and] are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of His mysteries. And there is no cause for wonder if this is the case with us as respects things spiritual and heavenly, and such as require to be made known to us by revelation.”¹² Even the knowledge acquired is given by grace: “We are able by the grace of God to explain some of them, while we must leave others in the hands of God.”¹³ Contrary to the Gnostic understanding, knowledge cannot ascend to the divine because the divine is above human knowledge. Secondly, isolated knowledge is warned against in scripture. As Paul says in

¹¹ Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Albert C. Outler. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/augustine_enchiridion_02_trans.htm, Chapter 12.

¹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Robert and William Rambaut. (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885). <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>, II.28.

¹³ *Ibid*, II.28.

First Corinthians, “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.”¹⁴ Knowledge is not necessarily evil, but on its own it leads to arrogance. Therefore, Irenaeus says, “it is... better and more profitable to belong to the simple and unlettered class, and by means of love to attain to nearness to God, than by imagining ourselves learned and skillful.”¹⁵

The knowledge of the Gnostics is replaced by grace through the incarnation. The Christian belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ does not oppose all of Platonic thought, but it radically transforms it. The incarnation essentially reverses the order of the allegory of the cave. Rather than man ascending through knowledge to a higher realm, knowledge, in physical form, descends to man. In contrast to the idea of man’s ascension to God, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”¹⁶ This act of love bridges the gap between the physical and the spiritual. Fallen creation is redeemed through the God-man, Jesus Christ. Christ came in physical flesh and redeemed not only lost souls, but bodies as well. The very fact that Christ assumed human flesh is telling. As Matthew Lee Anderson says, “If ever there was [sic] a question about the goodness of the physical body, the incarnation of Jesus Christ definitively answered it.”¹⁷

Christ’s incarnation dignifies the human body. It also saves it. Irenaeus said, “If souls would have perished unless they had been righteous, then righteousness must have

¹⁴ 1st Corinthians 8:1.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.26.

¹⁶ John 14:6.

¹⁷ Matthew Lee Anderson, *Earthen Vessels*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2011), 21.

power to save bodies also.”¹⁸ Righteousness does have the power to redeem, but it is not the righteousness of the redeemed that saves someone.¹⁹ Rather, it is the righteousness of Jesus by which all men are saved. Thus it is imperative that Christ have a physical body to redeem the bodies of mankind. The physical world, as well as spiritual souls, is redeemed by the physical death and resurrection of Christ. Against Gnostic beliefs, orthodox Christianity holds that the divide between the physical and the spiritual is bridged not through one’s own ascent, but through the descent of the incarnation, and this redeems both body and soul.

Modern Evangelical Gnosticism

Though the physical world is not inherently evil, throughout Christian history Christians have time and again mistrusted physicality. Certain Christian spheres reject icons, pointing to the danger of a physical representation distracting one from the spiritual realities that truly matter. Iconophiles—those in favor of icons—argue that, rather than being a distraction, contemplation of the physical representation leads one to a greater spiritual reality. This issue, arising around the time of the Reformation, continues to split Christians and forces them to ask where the line should be drawn between the physical and spiritual. It is worth noting that the fear of the physical is not wholly unfounded. Because of the reality of the fall, people are prone to idolatry. Too high esteem for the material, without regard to its relation to the spiritual, can cause one to idolize the physical world. Furthermore, there does exist a separation between the physical and spiritual; these realms are *not* united. The Christian understands that this

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.26.

¹⁹ “None is righteous, no, not one.” (Romans 3:10).

division is a result of the fall, not of creation, as the Gnostics believe. Augustine helps understand how the physical-spiritual gap can be bridged without committing idolatry. He distinguishes between things that are used and things that are enjoyed. “For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake.”²⁰ He says that only God is worth resting in for its own sake, so every other lesser good should be enjoyed for the sake of enjoying God. This is the proper view of the physical world in relation to the spiritual; the physical points to a higher reality. Rightly ordered love of physical things allows one to grasp spiritual realities.

Of course, this is the essence of a sacrament and even the way Jesus chooses to explain himself. A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward reality, a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality. Likewise Jesus referred to himself in material terms. Not only is the Son of God incarnate in flesh, but he calls himself the Bread of Life. He does not seek to lift people up to a loftier knowledge of himself, but rather gives himself in terms of what people already know. In other words, he does not lift them out of the cave (yet), he descends into the cave to the people. In consequence, our own rightly ordered love and understanding of material goods, orients the self to a deeper love of the divine.

Further, rather than being a hindrance to a relationship with God, physicality is a necessity to our relationship with him. The glory of God has always been concealed by a physical veil, and man has always been in need of a mediator. Michael Horton notes that “the immediacy of the divine-human relationship”²¹ that characterizes Gnosticism is

²⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. *Selected Library*, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/ddc.html>, I.4.

²¹ Michael Horton, “Gnostic Worship.” *White Horse Inn*, August 14, 2007, Vol. 4, Issue 4.

counter-biblical. “Even Israel could not approach God on its own terms, as we see at Mount Sinai. God instructed Moses that, as in any covenant or treaty, a mediator was needed.”²² Exodus 20:8-19 says that the people of Israel “trembled with fear” and would not speak to God for fear of death; they went to Moses as their mediator. Horton says of this “we learn that staying at a distance because of fear is the normal reaction to being in the presence of God. Gnostics have no place for fear.”²³ The ability for man to approach God did change in the incarnation, but not because man could suddenly grasp the glory of the Lord, but rather because the Lord stripped himself of glory and veiled himself in flesh. Likewise, he instituted the sacraments so that the physical veil and means of mediation would continue. Gnosticism, however, holds flesh as evil and a hindrance to a direct relationship with God. Horton notes:

If the self enjoyed a direct and immediate relationship with God’s Spirit, and knowledge came through a secret revelation of a mystical nature, surely the introduction of material means of grace—the printed word (accessible to everyone), water (in Baptism), and bread and wine (the Eucharist)—actually become impediments to real fellowship with God.²⁴

Contrary to this, true Christianity holds that the sacraments are a necessary means of relating to God—or rather God relating to us. Physicality, then, is not evil; it is good and necessary for a relationship with Christ.

Christians still have a tendency to create a rift between the physical and spiritual and hold the physical in contempt, or as neutral at best. This manifests itself in a variety of ways. Anderson bluntly states that “traditional evangelicalism has deeply Gnostic

²² Horton, “Gnostic Worship.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Michael Horton, “The New Gnosticism.” *White Horse Inn*, August 14, 2007, Vol. 4, Issue 4.

tendencies.”²⁵ These Gnostic tendencies to distrust the physical have practical implications for life on earth. Anderson relates the effects this has on the Christian conception of the body. His anti-Gnostic starting point is: “God created the body as good, it is currently tainted by the presence of sin (but it is not the source of sin *per se*), and God is going to raise it up again on the last day.”²⁶ Both Michael W. Philliber and Michael Horton note the Gnosticism within the conception of worship in church, and Horton says:

The church growth movement, merging these Gnostic influences with marketing, rids churches of all of that heavy stuff. The building is designed for utility, not for worship. The goal is to create an atmosphere of neutrality and comfort for the people, not to evoke a sense of divine transcendence for worshippers. After all, ‘It’s just a building.’²⁷

This statement—it’s just a building—is deeply Gnostic. The idea that physicality does not matter has its roots in the belief that physicality is bad. Yet if the incarnation of Christ matters (which it does), then flesh-ness of all things matters, at least to an extent. In other words, if God reveals himself through physical means—as he does through his incarnation and through the sacraments—then the physical world takes on great importance, for material things have the potential to lift one to a greater spiritual reality. As C.S. Lewis remarks in his essay “The Weight of Glory,” the things in this world “are good images of what we really desire.”²⁸ They are echoes of the things in the world to come. When rightly ordered, they do not distract one from that world, but instead remind one of it. In Lewis’s retelling of the myth of Psyche and Cupid, the immediate things of

²⁵ Anderson, *Earthen Vessels*, 37.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 41.

²⁷ Horton, “Gnostic worship.”

²⁸ Lewis, C. S. *The Weight of Glory*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 4.

Psyche's world instilled in her a longing "to find the place where all the beauty came from...the place where [she] ought to have been born."²⁹ Under-valuing, or holding the physical world in contempt, means foregoing real opportunities to understand the spiritual realm people claim to care so much about.

Gnosticism of Place

Gnostic tendencies have woven themselves deeply into a Christian understanding of place, which in turn has implications on the way Christians think about heaven. Just as Gnostics remove the physical veil between God and man and would ascend directly to God, Christians tend to do a similar thing in regards to place. Holding to the belief that one's true home is heaven, many completely disregard their physical homes. Yet just as physical matter is necessary for a relationship with God, physical place is essential to a further understanding of one's spiritual home. In Revelation, heaven is described as a new Jerusalem.³⁰ It is not described as a place altogether different from the world already known. It is the present home redeemed and made new. This point is aptly illustrated in L.M. Montgomery's novel *Anne of the Island*. Published in 1915, it is the third book in the Canadian author's *Anne of Green Gables* series. During a visit home from college, Anne gives words of comfort to a young, dying friend who is afraid of the afterlife. "I'm not afraid but that I'll go to heaven, Anne," the friend says. "But—it'll all be so different...Heaven must be very beautiful, of course...but, Anne, *it won't be what I've*

²⁹ C.S. Lewis. *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 75.

³⁰ Revelation 21:1-2.

been used to.”³¹ Anne comforts her by challenging her assumption that heaven will be different.

I think, perhaps, we have very mistaken ideas about heaven—what it is and what it holds for us. I don’t think it can be so very different from life here as most people seem to think. I believe we’ll just go on living, a good deal as we live here—and be *ourselves* just the same—only it will be easier to be good and to—follow the highest. All the hindrances and perplexities will be taken away, and we shall see clearly. Don’t be afraid, Ruby.³²

Anne’s argument is that heaven, though beyond one’s wildest imagination, will somehow, at the same time, be deeply familiar. This conviction that heaven will not be so different as life in the here and now, does not lead her to a more worldly life, but rather it prompts her to see the potential of this life to point to the next life. Montgomery writes of Anne’s renewed perspective after visiting the friend, “When she came to the end of one life it must not be to face the next with the shrinking terror of something wholly different... The little things of life, sweet and excellent in their place, must not be the things lived for; the highest must be sought and followed; the life of heaven must be begun here on earth.”³³ The reality that the spiritual realm can be perceived through the physical makes it possible to begin the life of heaven on earth. The search for heaven, then, must begin in our homes.

³¹ L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of The Island*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 106. (emphasis in original).

³² *Ibid*, 107.

³³ *Ibid*, 109.

CHAPTER THREE

Hannah Coulter: The Physical Need for Membership

Introduction

Hannah Coulter, one of Wendell Berry's most well-known novels, shows how he uses the homecoming motif to combat Gnosticism and emphasize the goods of home in a culture that no longer seems to value the particularity of place. Throughout the three-part structure of the story, we see clearly how Berry is weaving a homecoming narrative throughout each part that is finally resolved—whether satisfactorily or not—in the final pages. Within this weaving, Berry shows the importance of work, identity, and community and how these things, grounded in place, combat the falsities of Gnosticism. Finally, looking back to the overall narrative structure, Berry uniquely adapts the traditional homecoming motif to an increasingly place-less culture.

The Homecoming Motif in Hannah Coulter

Plots derive movement from conflict of some kind, and the conflict of homecoming stories is that of displacement. All stories have a conflict-resolution story arc; for the homecoming motif, the conflict is a character's separation from his/her home and the resolution is when the character is reunited with that home.

Wendell Berry divides *Hannah Coulter* into three parts. Part one describes Hannah Coulter's life from childhood to her first marriage. It covers her mother's death, her father's remarriage, and her Grandmam's guidance in her life. The first displacement

in Hannah's life is when she had to move to another room in the house to make room for her stepmother and stepbrothers. This displacement is only a foreshadow of the more significant displacement to come later when she takes the advice of her Grandmam and leaves that home for good. "You're grown up now," her grandmother tells her one morning, "You have graduated from school. You're a valedictorian. You're smart, and you can do things. This is not the right place for you. You need to go."¹ Hannah, though fearful, agreed that she "had to go." The place was not her own anymore, and so she left it. This is Hannah's first major separation, leaving her displaced and in need of a home.

She finds this place when she marries her first husband, Virgil. His family becomes her family; his place, her place. Hannah reflects, "I needed to belong somewhere. I belonged to Grandmam as I always will, but I didn't any longer belong in her place." The Feltners (Virgil's family), she says, "let me belong to them and to their place."² Her placement within the Feltner family placed her in a lasting community.

This is the first conflict—resolution sequence in the novel, but it is overshadowed by a sorrow that threatens Hannah's placement. As Part One ends and merges into Part Two, Virgil goes missing in World War II. As it turns out, he will never be found. Virgil's death has ramifications on Hannah's placement in the world—both in the concrete and abstract senses. The placement she had in the community through Virgil's love to her, though still there, now had a gap, estranging her once again.

In Part Two, Hannah finds her physical place through another person. She meets and marries Nathan Coulter, and they begin to build a life together. Hannah, as narrator,

¹ Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (California: Counterpoint, 2004), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 41.

says of Nathan: “He wanted a life for us to live and a place for us to live it in...In order to have the place, he needed me. In order to have me, he needed the place.”³ Hannah and Nathan establish their place; they bought an old farm, fixed it up, slowly, and built a life there. Hannah will never be physically displaced again.

The final displacement creating a conflict—resolution pattern comes from Hannah’s children, who choose to displace themselves. The childrens’ departure from home creates an ache in the story that longs to be resolved. This ache is the desire for homecoming—not the homecoming of Hannah anymore, but of her legacy. This ache is resolved when Hannah’s grandson returns home, but the lingering feeling of the outside world closing in seems to threaten the durability of return. Virge comes home, but as the world progresses, home seems harder to maintain. In this way, Berry adapts the homecoming motif to a contemporary world where the ability to abide is increasingly challenged. In so doing, he uses the motif to counter Gnostic ideology that denies that the “progress” of the modern world comes with any cost at all.

Gnostic Identity

Contemporary ideas of identity, while not exclusively Gnostic, do have Gnostic leanings and tendencies. “One of the predominant traits of contemporary North America culture,” says Stephen Pope, “is its unmitigated reference to the value of the individual self.”⁴ In search of identity, the modern man separates himself from others. Such phrases as “expressive individualism” have come up in recent years to describe the replacement

³ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 67.

⁴ Stephen Pope, “Expressive Individualism and True Self-Love: A Thomistic Perspective,” *The University of Chicago Press* 71, no. 3, (July 1991): 384.

of “the traditional values of altruism, self-sacrifice, and sympathy for others” with the “values of self-actualization, self-esteem, and self-acceptance.”⁵ The idea is that true, personal identity is found in isolation. Individualism would seem a kind of pre-requisite for identity; who you are is established by what emerges when disconnected from those around you. Berry says, “According to the new norm, the child’s destiny is not to succeed the parents, but to outmode them...he or she is educated to *leave* home and earn money in a provisional future that has nothing to do with place or community.”⁶ This break in succession that Berry talks about goes hand in hand with modern ideas of identity. The true self is revealed when one steps away from the tradition of the past; the family heritage—or any heritage—is viewed as a hindrance, rather than a help, to self-identity. This certainly squares with Gnostic ideas. Both for the modern and the Gnostic, abstraction aids the search for identity. For the modern, one abstracts himself from surrounding circumstances to get at his true self. For the Gnostic, the true self is the spiritual self and so he must abstract himself from the physical. Robert P. George explains the Gnostic understanding of identity in this way:

For Gnostics, it is the immaterial, the mental, the affective that ultimately matters...the material or bodily is inferior—if not a prison to escape, certainly a mere instrument to be manipulated to serve the goals of the ‘person,’ understood as the spirit or mind or psyche. The self is a spiritual or mental substance; the body, its merely material vehicle.⁷

The Gnostic achieves a true notion of the person through a detachment from the physical. For the modern, identity is found by disregarding family and community. As Berry

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Berry, “The Work of Local Culture,” 162.

⁷ Robert P. George, “Gnostic Liberalism,” *First Things* 268 (Dec. 2016), 34.

shows, the physical, the family, and the community are intertwined. His view, contrary to modern, Gnostic ideas of expressive individualism, is that identity is achieved through these things.

Identity in Hannah Coulter

For Berry identity is enhanced, rather than oppressed, through community. In *Hannah Coulter* identity, people, and place are woven tightly together, overlapping and interchanging so that it is difficult to separate them into distinct categories. For my purposes I will seek to show how community is made up of people and place and how Berry uses this to show both personal and communal identity, thereby showing the necessity of the physical in establishing and enhancing identity.

Hannah's identity is surely very much contingent on other people. "And Grandmam, as I have seen in looking back, was the decider of my fate. She shaped my life, without of course knowing what my life would be...If it hadn't been for her, what would my life have been? I don't know. I know it surely would have been different."⁸ From the outset of the story, Hannah's character is shaped by the people around her. In fact, though the narrative voice of the story is Hannah's, the opening lines of the book are not about her, but rather a quotation from Nathan. The quotation is from a story Hannah only knows through Nathan, from before she knew him. Not only does Nathan's relationship with her shape who she is, but even Nathan's life outside of and before his relationship with Hannah is a factor in her own story. Beginning the narrative this way

⁸ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 11.

makes Hannah's story a part of Nathan's; though the preceding pages will tell of Hannah's life before she came to know him, her identity is very much shaped by him.

Her first marriage to Virgil similarly affects her identity. "Virgil's and my marriage was going...to have to be part of a place already decided for it, and part of a story begun long ago and going on."⁹ She sees her story as a part of something larger; her story is a small story within a story already "begun long ago" and that will keep "going on." Rather than "expressive individualism" that puts the self at the center, Hannah's self-actualization paradoxically comes from another. This other, namely Virgil, is able to give to her because he himself has been given to by others. "The love he bore to me was his own, but also it was a love that had been borne to him, by people he knew, people I now knew, people he loved. That, I think, was what put tears in his eyes when he looked at me."¹⁰ Clearly, Hannah's personal identity is enhanced by her relationship with others.

Wendell Berry does not separate people from place, and so consequently, Hannah's identity is also rooted in her place. As Hannah says, "Our story is the story of our place."¹¹ This statement shows the importance Berry sees in the relation between story and identity. First, Hannah says *our* story. She does not separate her identity from Nathan's, as already shown. Second, she does not separate identity from place, either. As already mentioned, Hannah's story at a very basic, structural level, corresponds to her displacement and belonging. Deeper than this, however, the place seems inseparable from who she is and her relationship to others. "Here, on this place, among its stories

⁹ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

remembered and forgotten, Nathan and I made our love for each other.”¹² Berry does not view place as an accidental aspect of one’s life. Rather it is central to it. Who Hannah is depends upon where she and Nathan make their home and raise a family. Certain intangible aspects come together in these things, but far from being independent and (as is often thought) superior to the tangible aspects of home, they are rooted in the physical. “Love in this world doesn’t come out of thin air. It is not something thought up. Like ourselves, it grows out of the ground. It has a body and a place.”¹³

Membership

Community is made up of peoples and places, and there is a certain interdependence between these to preserve what Berry calls the “Membership.” The membership is principally upheld through the stories of the place and individual identity is found within the membership.

One thing Berry is known for is his creation of The Port William Membership. All of his fiction takes place within the context of this membership, creating an incredible community through the books themselves. Part of Hannah’s coming into identity involves her initiation into this membership. “I was making myself at home,” she says. “I had come to what would be my life’s place...I had come unknowing into what Burley would have called the ‘membership’ of my life. I was becoming a member of Port William.”¹⁴ Her membership is important to her; she “loved taking part” in the community.¹⁵ Though

¹² Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 88.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 42.

¹⁵ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 43.

the story is about her, it depends upon the larger context of the community, and her story is seen as a part of their story.

Indeed, in commenting on the loss brought about by World War II, Hannah describes her grief not in singular terms, but as a shared communal experience.

I need to tell about my people in their grief...In a little community like this it is around us and in us all the time, and we know it. We know that every night, war or no war, there are people lying awake grieving, and every morning there are people waking up to absences that never will be filled.¹⁶

Hannah's own grief is encapsulated in her description of the sorrow of her people. "It was not, strictly speaking, *my* sorrow. It was the sorrow of the family, of Port William, of the whole country."¹⁷

For Berry, community and membership are preserved through stories creating a mutual dependence between story and place. The stories need the place and the place needs the stories. He gives an account of storytelling and its importance to communities in his essay, "The Work of Local Culture."

There used to be a sort of institution in our part of the country known as 'sitting till bedtime.' After supper, when they weren't too tired, neighbors would walk across the fields to visit each other...They told each other stories. They told each other stories, as I knew myself, that they all had heard before. Sometimes they told stories about each other, about themselves, living again in their own memories and thus keeping their memories alive. Among the hearers of these stories were always the children.¹⁸

These stories, Berry argues, preserve the identity of the community. The advent of leaving, as a good, causes a break in succession. The stories are forgotten and the place loses its identity. "As the children depart, generation after generation, the place loses its

¹⁶ Ibid, 61.

¹⁷ Ibid, 41.

¹⁸ Berry, "The Work of Local Culture," 158.

memory of itself, which is its history and its culture. And the local history, if it survives at all, loses its place.”¹⁹ The place therefore needs the stories to preserve itself.

Conversely, the stories are preserved by the place. In telling of his family’s history, Berry says,

It is not beside the point, or off my subject, to notice that these stories and their meanings have survived because of my family’s continuing connection to its home place...If we had not lived there to be reminded and to remember, nobody would have remembered. If we, like most of our generation, had moved away, the place with its memories would have been lost to us and we to it.²⁰

The Gnostic would separate these stories from their place, insisting that they do not depend upon it. The abstract reality of the stories for the Gnostic are independent of and valued above the physical reality in which they take place. Berry, however, rightly realizes that one cannot separate the physical and the spiritual—the place from the story. The survival of the story depends upon the land to remind members of the place.

In *Hannah Coulter*, Berry uses the stories of the place to show its particularity and the people’s membership of Port William. When Hannah is still a young woman, she hears the story of Burley and Big Ellis driving in a car when the steering wheel comes disconnected, sending them flying into a ditch. When the story is first mentioned, it is merely amusing. Yet, at the end of the novel, Hannah’s grandson, Virge, comes back after wandering away into the world, much like the prodigal son, and much like a modern Gnostic, in search for personal identity. He is described looking “like a man who had been lost at sea and had made it to shore at last, but had barely made it”²¹ invoking strong

¹⁹ Berry, “The Work of Local Culture,” 165-166.

²⁰ Berry, *It All Turns on Affection*, 12.

²¹ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 182.

images of the Odyssey. He tells Hannah, “I want to be here. I want to live here and farm. It’s the only thing I really want to do. I found that out.”²² His search for expressive individualism—his abstraction from his inherited place—led him right back home again. Hannah puts him to work for Danny Branch. After work one day, Virge comes home and tells Hannah the story of Burley and Big Ellis. Hannah listens and knows the significance of Virge telling her this story of the place.

I thought, anyhow, that something had begun to mend in him when he came in one evening after he had worked all day, cleaning a barn on the Feltner place with Fount Branch, who remembers things, and he told me from start to finish the story of Burley and Big Ellis and the disconnected steering wheel.²³

Virge, through his work, learns a story of the place. This signals his re-initiation into the Port William membership. Through this he is also a sign of hope, a young Member who will preserve the place by the remembrance and the passing on of stories.

The picture of community that Berry puts forth in this novel and through his entire fictional membership structure is, at its core, anti-Gnostic. Berry’s community depends upon the physical aspects of place. The Gnostic seeks to sever these two. Gnosticism sees community as a good, yet holds physicality as evil. Thus, community must be achieved through a spiritual unification. As shown, the community depends upon the stories of the place, and the stories depend upon the place—the literal, physical land—to remind and remember. Gnosticism values community in general, but not in particular.

²² Ibid, 183.

²³ Ibid, 184.

The Physical Need for Community

The modern world makes placed community harder and harder. Berry sees threats to story-telling coming both from within and from without. Television and other forms of entertainment threaten to steal people away from their porches where the story-telling happens, and give other stories that have no bearing on communal identity. Industrialism comes from without and threatens to take away the land that the stories depend upon. Further, people are moved by necessity and this reality has implications on community in the modern world as well. It is not necessarily that back in the “good ol’ days” people had more room in their hearts to value the intrinsic goods of community and now people do not. Rather, as Berry shows, community was valued because it was immediate and it was necessary.

Community is stronger in Berry’s world because it is necessary. As Nathan and Hannah grow older, it becomes more difficult to keep up their farm. Their own children had grown and left the place, and so they had to rely on their community to help them.

As Nathan and I got old and our place called out more and more for younger people, the living who meant the most to us were Danny and Lyda Branch and their children. They had always been part of our membership, we had loved them always, but there came a time when they were necessary to us. We couldn’t have got along without them. They have been a godsend.²⁴

Nathan and Hannah needed their neighbors not in an abstract sense, but in a very real and present one. Calling the Branches a “godsend” is not an exaggeration; the Coulter’s livelihood depended upon the help of their community in a way that a gnostic could not understand. When community is not necessary in an immediate, physical sense, people—and especially Christians—resort to a gnostic understanding of community that separates

²⁴ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 148-49.

community from physical needs. In *Hannah Coulter* when comfort is given, Berry describes it in physical terms. “The comfort somehow gets passed around.” This phrase—*passed around*—is tangible. Berry goes on: “a few words that are never forgotten, a note in the mail, a look, a touch, a pat, a hug, a kind of waiting with, a kind of standing by, to the end.”²⁵ The waiting with and standing by are expressed through the physical gestures. When Nathan dies, Hannah receives comfort through the most mundane, physical things. “The kitchen at home was full of brought-in food. It is wonderful how much grief and sympathy in Port William have gone into cooking.”²⁶

Likewise, Virge receives help through the physical. When he first arrives, Hannah’s love, care, and forgiveness are expressed through tangible gestures. He first washes himself, then Hannah feeds him, finally she kisses him goodnight. Very few words are exchanged; his welcome home is almost entirely made up of Hannah’s physical actions of care. Hannah also knows the best cure for his lost soul is to put him to work. “I want you to put him to work and keep him at it. All day every day,” Hannah tells Danny Branch. As he begins to work, Hannah notices that the “confidence seems to be coming back into his eyes.”²⁷

The kind of help that is given and received in Berry’s world is tangible, necessary, and more present, unlike—I argue—much of the community found within modern, Christian culture. For example, Christian small groups create community that is indispensable and invaluable to many Christians. Yet, the help offered in Christian small groups is of a different kind than Berry’s physical comfort that can be “passed around.”

²⁵ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 62.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 165.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 182-84.

Grief and struggles are almost always, if not entirely, dealt with on only a spiritual level. Granted, physical needs are often addressed in a church setting. Small groups begin with a meal, people meet with a pastor over coffee, and of course the common Sunday potluck all combine these physical and abstract elements. These gestures reveal our innate understanding that the physical and spiritual go together, yet they do not go as far or deep to bind people together in the way that they can and do in an agrarian community like Port William. While praying for someone's wayward child is by no means less *real* a form of support, it does seem less *present*. This does not mean one should disregard the spiritual—Hannah certainly cared about Virge's soul. Yet, we are fleshly beings who relate to the spiritual through the physical. Consequently, community is stronger when the help offered and taken is not merely abstract. Vulnerability is often talked of and praised as a virtue. The act of opening up and sharing one's real and honest struggles is highly encouraged. And yet what could be more vulnerable than a man asking his neighbor for help plowing his field because he will not be able to feed and provide for his family if he does not have the help. "As long as the diverse economy of our small farms lasted," says Berry, "our communities were filled with people who needed one another and knew that they did. They needed one another's help in their work, and from that they needed on another's companionship."²⁸ The need for community necessarily creates a rich foundation for other aspects of companionship to flourish. Were the Branches *merely* friends of necessity to the Coulters? Of course not. Yet their friendship seems richer and lasting because they needed one another.

Community is also stronger in Berry's world because it is immediate.

Technological advances in our modern world, making transportation and communication

²⁸ Wendell Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017), 30.

much easier and efficient, allow for personal relationship void of spatial relation. Out of necessity, community used to be primarily (if not entirely) based on proximity. It simply was not possible to have any kind of meaningful relationship with someone across the world. This is not the case anymore. Any number of technologies allows for conversations to happen between two physically separated people—even face to face with video calls. On a smaller scale, people living within the same city are not put into contact with each other nearly as often as they once were. The common meeting places—church, the grocery store, the barber shop—used to be, out of necessity, confined to a community and the members of that community all went to the same places to worship, shop, and get a hair cut. Now, however, transportation makes it possible for these things to be spread out across multiple neighborhoods. Cars make the world smaller and so people bump into each other less. Even within single communities, people are geographically dispersed. There are good things that come from this. People have more choices in where to shop. A woman in America can maintain a stronger relationship with her son’s family across the world through things like social media and FaceTime. Yet, these goods that come from a greater spatial transience also have harmful side effects. It is precisely these negative effects that Gnosticism ignores and that Berry wishes our eyes to be opened to.

The Limitations of Place

Expressive individualism seeks freedom from limitations. As a result, being free from a particular place seems necessary to forming identity. As Berry shows, this is not the case, and arises from a confusion about the nature of limits.

Limitless-ness is impossible for man to achieve because of his finitude. Any promise of unfettered choices is a lie. Therefore, the idea that being “tied down” to a particular place is inhibiting freedom is not true. It is inhibiting a certain kind of freedom, namely, the freedom from place. Yet granting this freedom also means limiting oneself from the goods that come from abiding in a particular place. The modern gnostic, in search of individual identity, believes that freedom from connections to place and people is a kind of unlimited freedom giving rise to a greater sense of self. In reality, it is merely choosing one thing instead of another, and limiting oneself from that other thing. Both have their goods; people gain valuable insight from traveling and moving, but the error of the modern world—the error that Berry addresses—is believing that these goods, which are felt and known in a spiritual sense, negate the goods of home which are felt, known, and understood through the physical place.

Particularity of Community

The particularity of community also matters to Berry. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther* Goethe says, “The most restless of travellers ends up pining for his homeland once again, and discovers in his cottage, in the arms of his wife and amidst the children, and in the labours that are necessary to support them, that joy he sought in vain in the wide world.”²⁹ Berry shows that the “wide world” is found in the particular corners of it. On a walk Hannah and Virgil come to an opening looking out over a valley and across the land “nearly to the lock above Hargrave.” Hannah exclaims, “You can see the whole

²⁹ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: Penguin Classics, 1989), 44.

world.”³⁰ Her world is what she knows; it is not restricting or too small. In fact, it is just the opposite. Hannah describes the war as a force that brings the outside world into her particular world, destroying boundaries and bringing confusion. “Our minds were driven out of the old boundaries into the thought of absolute loss, absolute emptiness, in a world that seemed larger even than the sky that held it.”³¹ The Gnostic seeks a transcendence from the particular to the universal; Berry reverses this order. The universal comes into the particular, bringing coherence and making it whole.

Christian Gnosticism completely disregards the physical world in its relation to heaven and eternity. For the members of Port William, Port William *is* heaven, at least a form of it. Just as Lewis believes the temporal world holds echoes of the eternal one, Berry expresses Port William’s relation to heaven in a similar way. Hannah describes Port William as “an immortal place. Some day there will be a new heaven and a new earth and a new Port William coming down from heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband, and whoever has known her before will know her then.”³² In describing the “comfort [that] somehow gets passed around,” Hannah says, “Once in a while we hear it sung out in a hymn, when every throat seems suddenly widened with love and a common longing: *in the sweet by and by, We shall meet on that beautiful shore. We all know what that beautiful shore is. It is Port William with all its loved ones come home alive.*”³³ Heaven is seen through the reality of Port William. Rather than disregarding the physical to ascend to the spiritual, as Gnosticism teaches, the higher realm is reached through the

³⁰ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

³³ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 62.

lower realm. The idea that heaven will come down looking like Port William and it will be familiar to those in the membership is completely at odds with Gnostic understanding. It seems to ring true to a Christian one, however. As noted before, Revelation calls heaven a “new Jerusalem.” Clearly, the particularity of Port William matters to Berry. Or rather, the particularity of one’s own community matters for it is through the physical home that the spiritual home is known.

This reality has necessary implications for the present life, the present world, and one’s care for them. After Nathan’s death, the reality of the next world does not turn Hannah’s thoughts away from this one, but rather causes her to “[turn] again to that other world I had taught myself to know, the world that is neither past nor to come, the present world where we are alive together and love keeps us.”³⁴ Viewing the present world as a reflection of the future world enables one to see inherent good in place so that land succession becomes intrinsically valuable and temporal homes gain sacramental value as they point to eternity.

³⁴ Ibid, 166.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jayber Crow: Work Cultivating Affection

Jayber Crow, like all of Berry's fiction, is a story about home. Published in 2000, the novel traces the life of a man from early childhood to his final days, and in this novel home is no less connected to people and place as it was in *Hannah Coulter*. Like Hannah, Jayber's story begins with displacement. When his caretakers, his Uncle Othy and Aunt Cordie, die, Jayber goes to an orphanage called The Good Shepherd. For the duration of his youth and his time at The Good Shepherd, Jayber feels disconnected and lost; he lacks home. "I felt so far from home that I might as well have been in another world," he says.¹

In fact, The Good Shepherd is (ironically) an embodiment of Gnosticism. Jayber refers to The Good Shepherd as a divided world:

It was divided between an ideal world of order, as prescribed and demanded by the institution...and a real world of disorder...I know now that order was thought to emanate from the institution, and disorder from nature. Order was of the soul, whose claims the institution represented. Disorder was of the body, which was us.²

This is a Gnostic sentiment that separates the ideal from reality and holds that while order and goodness come from the soul, the evils of the world come from nature. Later, Jayber reflects on the ideology of his teachers: "Everything bad was laid on the body, and everything good was credited to the soul." He realizes, however, how they contradict

¹ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2000), 30.

² Ibid, 32.

themselves. “And yet these same people believed in the resurrection of the body.”³ Berry highlights the Gnostic tendencies within the Christian tradition to separate these two things, and as a counter, shows in Jayber’s story how they are deeply connected.

Jayber’s Journey Home

Jayber’s separation from his rightful place also brought with it a separation from his identity. When he arrives at The Good Shepherd, they ask his name and he tells them “Jonah” (which was his given name). Brother Whitespade, the superintendent, replied, “Mr. Crow, since I believe you have not yet found your way to Nineveh, I will call you J.” His identity was fragmented by displacement and lack of belonging. It turns out all students at The Good Shepherd have similarly truncated names and Jayber says, “We were thus not quite nameless, but also not quite named.”⁴ When Jayber re-enters the society of his home, Port William, he receives a new name and a new identity, that carries with it history of the place.

My rightful name is Jonah, but I had not gone by that name since I was ten years old. I had been called simply J., and that was the way I signed myself. Once my customers took me to themselves, they called me Jaybird, and then Jayber. Thus I became, and have remained, a possession of Port William.⁵

Jayber’s name progression is symbolic of his identity that is both given by and dependent on his belonging to particular places.

Thus the home he lacks while at The Good Shepherd is not merely any place where he might find belonging. Rather, it is a particular place, one that he inherently belongs to, though his personal memories and connection to the place are vague. The

³ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 49.

⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

place is his family's place, and consequently, he belongs to it and it to him. Berry shows this in Jayber's lack of groundedness while away from his home and through his journey back home.

While at The Good Shepherd, Jayber is preoccupied and, as he describes, "divided."

At [Port William] everything seemed to be held close in mind—in my mind or in some older or larger mind that my mind belonged to. The world was present when I shut my eyes, just as it was present when I opened them. At The Good Shepherd I entered for the first time a divided world—divided both from me and within itself. It was divided from me because it did not seem to be present.⁶

Jayber's sense of un-belonging is manifested in his lack of presence to the place. "I had ways of not allowing myself to be fully present in the classroom, even though I was physically confined there."⁷ His displacement from home causes a Gnostic separation. His spiritual presence and his physical presence are divided. Jayber describes a farm within view of The Good Shepherd as a kind of paradise that invokes homesickness within him. "I would let my mind go there and make itself at home," he said.⁸ He responds to the longing by seeking to make places for himself. He describes a corner of the library as "one of the best places in the world."⁹ He goes here to escape through books, once again, causing a separation. The corner in the library is only a means to escape from the place of The Good Shepherd that encompasses the corner. All the while, Jayber's heart and mind are elsewhere.

⁶ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 32.

⁷ Ibid, 34.

⁸ Ibid, 33.

⁹ Ibid, 34.

I never quite felt that I was somewhere I wanted to be. Where I wanted to be, always, day in and day out, year in and year out, was Squires Landing¹⁰ and all that fall of country between Port William up on the ridge and the river between Sand Ripple and Willow Run. When I heard or read the word *home*, that patch of country was what I thought of.¹¹

Berry shows Jayber as a disconnected person in a disconnected place in order to then show the good of connectedness.

Jayber's journey back home shows his inherent attachment to the place of his birth. While away from it, Jayber says, "I was preserving in myself a country and a life, steadfastly remembered, to which I secretly reserved my affection and my entire loyalty. I belonged, even defiantly, to what I remembered, and not to the place where I was."¹² When he outgrows The Good Shepherd, he must find a new place to live. He could go anywhere; he could view this as a new start. He could see it as an opportunity of "expressive individualism" and make a life for himself. Yet, "My relation to Squires Landing, my being in it and my absences from it, is the story of my life."¹³ Retrospectively, he knows his tie to the place; presently, he feels it.

Jayber's journey to Port William is a small coming of age story, placed within the larger narrative, that carries a mystical idea of belonging. The mystical elements of *Jayber Crow* show that Berry is not dedicated to removing spirituality, but rather putting forth a distinct way of reaching it. In fact, for Jayber, his connection to home relies on his mystical attraction to it. The events that lead him to Port William seem too designed to be

¹⁰ Squires Landing is a neighboring community to Port William, where Jayber spent his early boyhood days. Though distinct from Port William, the communities are connected by proximity and family heritage.

¹¹ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 36.

¹² Ibid, 38.

¹³ Ibid, 12.

chance. Jayber himself takes little credit for the life he has lived, saying, “But now it looks to me as though I was following a path that was laid out for me, unbroken, and maybe even as straight as possible, from one end to the other, and I have this feeling, which never leaves me anymore, that I have been *led*.”¹⁴

The first example of his path being laid out for him happens when, hitch-hiking, a man gives him a ride. The driver identifies himself as Sam Hanks. “I could have laughed, if I had let myself, or just as easily have cried. I knew who Sam Hanks was. He was the main livestock and tobacco hauler in Port William.”¹⁵ Jayber has grown up too much for Sam to recognize him, but this meeting deeply resonates with Jayber. He is familiar with this man in a way he has not been to anyone else in his life since he left Squires Landing. “On that morning in 1935 I had not yet heard Sam Hanks on the subject of his own independence, freedom, and dignity. But if he had proceeded to enlighten me I would not have been surprised.”¹⁶ This familiarity reaches even down to the dialect: “He said ‘privilege,’ in a way I remembered.”¹⁷

After this “chance” encounter, Jayber’s destined return to home continues as a flood both directs him and presents a challenge for him to get to Port William. When the flood comes, he heads toward Louisville, and he says he does not have an explanation for it.¹⁸ He seems only to be interested in seeing the river rising. This desire springs from his roots. He remembers the river from his youth. “I had lived for my whole childhood, you

¹⁴ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 74.

might say, in sight of that river.”¹⁹ Since his earliest days, Jayber was fascinated by the river. “The river moved me strangely, and I loved it from the day I first laid eyes on it.”²⁰ Jayber feels a sense of connection to the river because of his long-held love of it, and this connection leads him back to his home. Jayber seems to have very little agency in the matter. When, in the midst of the flood, a policeman turns Jayber away from crossing a bridge, Jayber says:

And then I said something that I had never thought of saying, that I didn’t even know was the truth until I remembered myself saying it. Right then I only felt all of a sudden so lonely and homesick I could barely talk. I said, ‘I’ve got to get to my people down the river.’
He said, ‘Your *people!* Where?’
‘Squires Landing!’ I said.²¹

Without ever consciously deciding to go there, Jayber “was on [his] way home, as surely as if [he] had a home to be on the way to.”²² Jayber’s lack of agency—this feeling of being *led*—serves to create the sense that his connection to the place is deeply rooted and inseverable.

After Jayber settles in Port William as the local barber, he begins to be truly at home and to become a part of the membership. Gradually the place accepts him as an inhabitant. The rest of the novel is about the Port William Membership and his place in it. My principle point will be to examine the idea of work within the novel and show how it is a strong deterrent to Gnosticism.

¹⁹ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²² *Ibid.*, 81.

Land-Work

First, before I comment on Berry's work ideology, it is necessary to say what I mean by "work." I use the term to refer to efforts closely—if not entirely—of a physical nature. In Berry's novels, this is most often farming, although certainly not limited to it. This kind of work—land-work, so to speak—is distinct from business-work, where one's efforts go to something much more removed from the physical world.

Work, in any sense, but especially the one in which I am using it, draws one to the physical world because at its most basic, fundamental level, work is for the fulfillment of physical needs. Insofar as work serves physical needs it is a reminder of physicality. Plainly, the Gnostic, then, suffers work as a necessity evil, serving the needs of a body that is, likewise, an unavoidable necessity. Matt Bonzo calls it "the guilt of being hungry," and says that "Food...has become a necessary evil."²³ Consequently, Gnosticism finds no value in work, and certainly not in physical labor.

In fact, Gnostic ideology has invaded the modern business economy. Just as Gnosticism reduces life to spiritual abstractions, business similarly distances the means from the end. As seen in the example of the Eucharist in chapter one, tangible things often point to abstract ones; the bread points to the Bread of Life. In things pertaining to the fulfillment of spiritual needs, the end is the spiritual reality and the means is the physical sign. The immediacy of the present life inverts this order. When it comes to physical sustainability, the end is the physical need that is met and the means is how it is met. In nourishment, an apple is the end (that meets the physical need for food) and the means is how the apple is attained. In an agrarian economy, the means is physical labor.

²³ Matt Bonzo, "And for This Food, We Give Thanks," in *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, 47.

The work to attain the apple is direct: planting, watering, nurturing, and finally harvesting. In a non-agrarian, business economy the means—that is, the work—is removed and abstracted from the end. The efforts to attain an apple are to make money to pay the person at the grocery store register, that will then be given to the store, that will transfer it to the apple company, who will then use it to pay the employee who participated in the work to grow the apple. There are several degrees of separation between the grower and the gatherer. Now I have over-simplified and put in very basic terms both the agrarian and business economies for the sake of clarification, but the point remains that in an agrarian context, the work and the aim of the work are intricately connected. “In eating there is a direct link between humanity and the land.”²⁴ This link is severed by industrialization, which is at its core a Gnostic abstraction. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the main character writes to a friend,

It is good that my heart can feel the simple and innocent pleasure a man knows when the cabbage he eats at table is one he grew himself; the pleasure he takes not only in eating the cabbage but in remembering all those good days, the fine morning he planted it, the mellow evenings he watered it and the delight he felt in its daily growth.²⁵

Werther’s sentiments resonate; it *is* good. Yet why is it good? *Jayber Crow* illuminates what Werther instinctively feels, as the story presents characters who pursue both right and wrong understandings of work.

A conscious understanding of and appreciation for the inherent good in creation transforms one’s ideology of work. It becomes worthy, with the ability to re-orient the self to a proper understanding of its place in the world. This potential means that work

²⁴ Bonzo, “And for This Food We Give Thanks,” 43.

²⁵ Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 45.

requires careful consideration; work matters, but even more, *how* we work matters. In *Jayber Crow*, Berry shows an ideology of work that, in his phrase borrowed from E.M. Forster, “all turns on affection,” and re-instills a love for and duty to particular place.

The Given World

Land-work resists Gnostic abstraction because of its reliance on grace.

Gnosticism, as previously stated, regards knowledge as the way to truth. Christianity recognizes the limits of knowledge and relies, instead, on grace. The work that Berry writes about (and lives) is a reminder of both the shortcomings of knowledge and the need for grace. Berry recognizes the inadequacy of knowledge when it comes to farming:

You can't learn to farm by reading a book. You can't lay out a fence line or shape a plowland or fell a tree or break a colt merely by observing general principles. You can't deal with things merely according to category; you are continually required to consider the distinct individuality of an animal or a tree, or the uniqueness of a place or situation.²⁶

The Gnostic's primary concern is with the general principles and the categories that Berry claims a farmer must not rely on. In *Jayber Crow* one character stands out among the rest for striving to industrialize his farm. Troy Chatham marries Mattie Keith and thereby inherits the Keith farm. He chooses to farm it in direct violation of the farming ethics that his father-in-law, Athey Keith, abided by, and Berry makes it clear that this is a bad thing. For him, “The business of farming had to do with ‘volume.’”²⁷ Quite unlike, his predecessor who carefully farmed the land attuned to the limitations of it, “Troy's one

²⁶ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 13.

²⁷ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 271.

aim was to be at work with the greatest available power in the biggest possible field.”²⁸

He conducted his farm according to the abstract, detached principles of industrialism, and he relied on the knowledge that he attained from the outside world, and in the end, this was his ruin.

So there he was, a man who had been given everything and did not know it, who had lost it all and now knew it, and who was boasting and grinning only to pretend for a few hours longer that he did not know it. He was an exhausted man on the way back, not to the nothing that he had when he started out, but to the nothing that everything had been created from.²⁹

Berry reflects back to the nothingness that existed before creation, implying that Troy’s farming tactics violate the command to “subdue the earth.”³⁰ This command immediately follows God’s gift of the garden to Adam. The proper posture of man, then, is to work in the knowledge that the earth is given. Troy relies on knowledge in his work; he relies on abstract notions about industrialized farming. Putting his full trust in these theories, he goes further and further into debt. Knowledge was not enough to save his farm, and it was not enough to save him.

Land-work teaches grace. A farmer cannot, as Troy did, trust knowledge alone; he must understand the “interworking of chance and choice”³¹ in the work of the land. Berry puts it beautifully in one of his Sabbath poems:

Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled

²⁸ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 271.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 360.

³⁰ Genesis 1:28.

³¹ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 1.

By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.³²

The farmer's duty is to till the field and then leave it to grace. Matt Bonzo says that at the heart of Berry's work "is a an understanding of the given-ness of our world."³³ Bonzo goes on to say that this given-ness inspires thanks. "The appropriate response is to give thanks because you have not so much manipulated or controlled the land for your purposes as learned to cooperate with the land in the bearing of the gift that it intended to give all along."³⁴ Work teaches the worker to rely not only on his knowledge, not only on his efforts, but also, and mostly (for without this his knowledge and efforts are for naught), on the grace of nature to yield its fruit.

Jayber Crow seems to recognize the given-ness of his life. "You can't choose, it seems, without being chosen," he says.³⁵ He takes little credit for the way his life has turned out. Instead he places it in relation to eternity and recognizes how he has been influenced by things outside of himself, independent of his own agency. Looking back near the end of his life Jayber reflects, "And so when I have thought I was *in* my story or in charge of it, I really have been only on the edge of it, carried along. Is this because we are in an eternal story that is happening partly in time?"³⁶ He sees his life as a part of something larger than his own story, and the time allotted for his place in it as something

³² Wendell Berry, *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013), 20.

³³ Bonzo, "And for this Food, We Give Thanks," 41.

³⁴ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 42.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 322.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 322.

he has been given. What most strongly demonstrates the grace in Jayber's story are his two debts, marking the beginning and the end of his career.

First, from before he even settled in Port William, Jayber was indebted to one of its members. As already mentioned, Sam Hanks was the first Port William character that Jayber comes into contact with. Jayber does not reveal his heritage to Sam, but instead remains anonymous. When Jayber parts with him, Sam gives him a little bit of cash. "I was already several blocks away when I put my hand into my pocket and felt paper. It was a new five-dollar bill that never had been folded but once."³⁷ Jayber calls it "liars wages," because he had not been honest with the man who gave it to him. When he settles in Port William, he knows that he must own up to his deception when Sam Hanks eventually comes in for a haircut. "Mr. Hanks, I'm sure you remember that you did me a big favor a couple years ago." Jayber says. Hanks replies, "I'm sure I don't, young man." Jayber re-tells the story that Sam claims not to remember.

I was in the midst of confessing my lie and acknowledging my right identity—which he undoubtedly already knew—when he said, "Son, you've got the wrong man."...He handed me a dollar bill. I took a five from under my cigar box, where I had it waiting for him, and wrapped his change in it. He stripped the coins out of the bill with his thumb as if hulling pees and laid the bill down onto the backbar. "Son," he said, going out, "I already *got* five dollars."³⁸

Sam gave Jayber this five-dollar bill of kindness and grace in a time when he most needed it. When he is able to pay it back, Sam refuses to take it. Jayber says he set that particular five-dollar bill apart so that he would know which one it was. "I kept it," he said, "to remind me that there are some accounts that cannot be settled."³⁹ This event

³⁷ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 60.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 106.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 131.

shows how the reality of grace rightly postures Jayber in his work; it humbles him and makes him realize that whatever service Port William needs him for, he reciprocally needs Port William, and his life is built upon the kindness of those around him.

After Jayber leaves his barbershop in town and moves down by the river, he becomes indebted to the Coulters as well. He tells Burley Coulter that he is going to leave and build himself a house. “Burley was grinning. He saw. He knew. But he said, ‘You don’t have to build no house. I *got* a house I’m not using.’”⁴⁰ I do not think it is a coincidence that Berry chose to italicize “got” in both this statement and Sam Hanks: “I already *got* five dollars.” The inflection connects the two statements, showing the similarities between the gifts Sam and Burley gave to Jayber; they both paved the way for his living. “And you’d be willing to part with it?” Jayber asks Burley about the house. “No need for me to *part* with it. I’ll just give you the use of it.”⁴¹ Later, after Burley’s death, Jayber says, “You will know how much, practically and otherwise, my life in Port William and here at the river had been his gift.”⁴² Jayber accepts the gifts given him, acknowledging the predestined aspects of his life, and responds with thanks and faithfulness.

⁴⁰ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 297.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 297.

⁴² *Ibid*, 318.

Fidelity

The understanding that the world is given rightly postures one to receive grace. This in turn leads to faithfulness. First, because it requires faith to receive grace. If one tills the field—resting his physical needs and the needs of his family on the success of his crops—then leaves the field to grace, then he must have faith that grace will allow the field to yield its fruit. Berry’s trust in the physical world is not naïve or sentimental; he knows that, because of the brokenness of the world, trusting in this world requires faith.

To love anything good, at any cost, is a bargain. It is a terrible thing to love the world, knowing that you are a human and therefore joined by kind to all that hates the world and hurries its passing—the violence and greed and falsehood that overcome the world that is meant to be overcome by love.⁴³

This bargain is what the Gnostic fears. At the same time, however, the belief that the world is given, and that it is a good gift, allows one to have the faith necessary to trust it. Berry as narrator says, “This is a book about Heaven.”⁴⁴ Yet in another place, he says, “This is, as I have said and believe, a book about Heaven, but I must say too that it has been a close call. For I have wondered sometimes if it would not finally turn out to be a book about Hell.”⁴⁵ What keeps the book from being about Hell is faith in the physical world because, “the earth speaks to us of Heaven.”⁴⁶ It takes faith to trust that the earth can do this, when also in the world is pain, sickness, heartache, anger, and death. The Gnostic does not have this faith; Jayber does.

⁴³ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 329.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 351.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 354.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 354.

The understanding of the world as given leads to faithfulness also because accepting the gift conjures up a sense duty in return. The proper response to the gift of grace is faith. In work, one lives out the response of faith. That these gifts of grace and faithfulness should arise from the physical world is, of course, anti-Gnostic. Accordingly, in his work, Jayber resists Gnostic abstraction and in so doing cultivates faithfulness to Port William, to the Membership, and finally to his marriage.

Barbering is an anti-Gnostic occupation that makes Jayber faithful to Port William. Jayber's occupation is anti-Gnostic, first of all, because it allows him to become familiar with the community through physicality. "I became, over the years, a pretty good student of family traits: the shapes of heads, ears, noses, hands, and so forth."⁴⁷ Jayber learns the shapes of heads and the positions of ears and through this comes to know the stories and lives of the people these arrangements belong to.

His work is also anti-Gnostic insofar as it fulfills a physical need. As discussed, Gnosticism resists physical needs of any kind. Getting a haircut is a kind of statement that physicality matters, that physical appearance matters, and that it is worth the fifty cents Jayber charges to tend to this physical need. Berry is not blind to the ways that simple tasks of personal care have the potential to orient us because they are a physical necessity. When describing his bathing routine, Jayber says he emerges from the water "cool and clean, delighted as a risen soul."⁴⁸ Berry uses obvious baptismal imagery in this depiction. Though more subtle, barbering offers a similar kind of renewal. It is but a haircut, yet it requires care and gives one a new appearance, if only to the smallest

⁴⁷ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 125.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 326.

degree. And it is never ending; hair always grows back. That we would have bodies that take constant and continual even daily care is another scandal for the Gnostic. Jayber's dutiful attendance to the physical needs of Port William objects to this Gnosticism.

Rejecting Gnostic tendencies through his role as town barber makes Jayber faithful to Port William. By being a barber, Jayber is faithful to the needs and the demands of the place. Certainly, he fulfills the need of haircuts for the individual citizens of the town, but more than an individual need, Port William—the place in general—needs a barber. The job ties him to the place, but it is also his connection to the place, before he even begins, that in some way qualifies him for the job. When he first washes up on the banks of Port William, he meets Burley Coulter and, after providing him a meal, Burley shows him the vacant barbershop.

It was clear that he wanted me to buy the shop, but at the time I had no idea of his reason. Had he bought the shop himself from Barber Horsefield, and was wanting to sell it at a profit? Was he anxious to redeem his own vision of the good life a man could live in such a place? Or, maybe, did he like me?⁴⁹

Burley, who Jayber is speaking of in this passage, most likely does like him. Yet even his liking is somewhat undeserved. He does not know Jayber well enough to like him for his own merit, but he knows Jayber's story, his past, and his family; he knows that he belongs to the place and so, in Burley's mind (and in Berry's) that qualifies him for the town barber. Even Jayber's acceptance of the position is a kind of loyalty to the place, a recognition that he needs the place and has a duty to it. In the subsequent years, Jayber dutifully provides the basic need for haircuts to the community, and through this, he comes to better know the people of Port William, deepening his fidelity to the town. "I have raked my comb over scalps that were dirty both above and beneath. I have lowered

⁴⁹ Berry, *Jayber Crow* 100.

the ears of good men and bad, smart and stupid, young and old, kind and mean; of men who have killed other men (think of that) and of men who have been killed (think of *that*).”⁵⁰ In a sense, barbering is a leveler; good men and bad men, smart and stupid all need haircuts. Even late in his career, when Athey Keith becomes too sick to leave his home, Jayber faithfully goes to his house to give him a haircut. In providing this most basic need, Jayber exercises fidelity to all of Port William. He is faithful in his work and so he is faithful to the people who need that work, and because of his loyalty to the place, his fidelity is enduring: “It was moving too, after a while, to realize that under my very hands a generation had grown up and another passed away.”⁵¹

Even to the end, when the feared “man behind the desk,” manifested in a government inspector, says Jayber’s shop is not up to regulation standards, Jayber remains faithful to the demands of the place, against those of a distanced authority. Unlike Troy, who was “increasingly taking the advice of people who were not in his circumstances,”⁵² Jayber allowed his standard for his barbershop to be set by those who needed his services, essentially by Port William. This eventually forces him to close up shop. Yet, even still, people continued to come to him for his services. He remained faithful to them and they remained faithful to him. “The ones who have remained have been faithful,” he says, “Their coming is made even more an act of faith because in this house on the river I have no mirrors on the walls. Here, I am the sole judge of my work. When they climb into the chair, they have to trust me.”⁵³ This simple demonstration of

⁵⁰ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 125.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 125.

⁵² *Ibid*, 233.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 306.

faith shows how the *place* gives way to fidelity. Those who do not belong to Port William would not trust Jayber, but those who do know him trust him and in doing so provide him the opportunity to be faithful to them in his work.

Jayber's work also makes him faithful to the membership. In addition to barbering, Jayber takes on the task of digging graves for burials and cleaning the church. Berry chooses perhaps the two most prominent places where Gnosticism has invaded Christianity and, both literally and metaphorically, puts Jayber to work in them, showing through these things the goodness of this life and how Gnosticism would seek to strip that away, pulling people further from a firm familiarity with "that sweet by and by."⁵⁴

The role of town grave-digger, at first glance, seems in line with Gnosticism because every grave is a strong reminder that the body does ultimately fail, physicality is defeated in the end, and the constant reminder of the frailty of human flesh would seem to lead one to a greater distrust and disregard for the body. For Jayber, however, his time spent in the graveyard seems yet another strong counter to Gnosticism. In the first place, because Berry shows the dignity of digging. "You can't dig a grave without working hard."⁵⁵ One cannot get more physically grounded than shoveling dirt. It is through this encounter with the dirt—not in spite of it—that Jayber thinks of and encounters greater realities. Jayber, like the Gnostic, sees the finality of death. "You couldn't forget," he says, "that all the people in Port William, if they lived long, would come there burdened and leave empty-handed many times, and would finally come and stay empty-handed."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 163 (Quoting the hymn "In the Sweet By and By).

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 158.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 158.

Yet, at the same time, while the graveyard is a reminder of the empty-handedness of death, it is also a reminder of the fullness of the resurrection. “I am as mystified as anybody by the transformation known as death, and the Resurrection is more real to me than most things I have not seen.”⁵⁷ Not only does the work make the resurrection seem more real to him, but it also causes him to see the Membership as a whole. Berry believes the present, living community is made richer by the lives, stories, and work of the members who came before and the preservation of the place for the ones to come after. This becomes a pressing reality in the midst of a graveyard.

The people there had lived their little passage of time in this world, had become what they became, and now could be changed only by forgiveness and mercy. The misled, the disappointed, the sinners of all the sins, the hopeful, the faithful, the loving, the doubtful, the desperate, the grieved and the comforted, the young and the old, the bad and the good—all, sufferers unto death, had lain down there together. Some were there who had served the community better by dying than by living. Why I should have felt tender toward them all was not clear to me, but I did.⁵⁸

Jayber’s heart is drawn toward the Membership. In caring for and honoring their memories, he cultivates and grows in himself an allegiance to even those he might otherwise despise. The graveyard bears the truth of stories and lives woven through and across time, preparing the place for Jayber and others. In carrying out his duty, Jayber responds in faithfulness to the grace given to him by the Membership.

The church represents a similar anti-Gnostic experience for Jayber because the Gnosticism inherent in the preaching seems contrary to the apparent beauty all around him. “The sermons, mostly, were preached on the same theme I had heard over and over at The Good Shepherd and Pigeonville: We must lay up treasures in Heaven and not be

⁵⁷ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 157.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 158.

lured and seduced by this world's pretty and tasty things that do not last but are like the flower that is cut down."⁵⁹ The preachers' Gnosticism seems to come, at least partially, from their frequent lack of place. Most have abstracted themselves from any particular place in the world and it gives way to a total abstraction from the world. Jayber continues,

They seemed to have come from some Never-Never Land... They were not going to school to learn where they were, let alone the pleasures and the pains of being there, or what ought to be said there. You couldn't learn those things in a school. They went to school, apparently, to learn to say over and over again, regardless of where they were, what had already been said too often. They learned to have a very high opinion of God and a very low opinion of his works.⁶⁰

He says that the preachers view Port William only theoretically as a place to be saved. They do not know it and its inhabitants as it is, a place of goodness and beauty, and sorrow and pain, a place with very good-hearted people and a place with some gossips and adulterers. Because they do not know the place, they can have no affection for it; they use it as a means to preach what they have learned to say, and once they have said it, they move on. As he had before at The Good Shepherd, Jayber realized the inconsistencies.

This religion that scorned the beauty and goodness of this world was a puzzle to me. To begin with, I didn't think *anybody* believed it. I still don't think so. Those world-condemning sermons were preached to people who, on Sunday mornings, would be wearing their prettiest clothes... By dressing up on the one day when most of them had leisure to do it, they signified their wish to present themselves to one another and to Heaven looking their best. The people who heard those sermons loved good crops, good gardens, good livestock and work animals and dogs; they loved flowers and the shade of trees, and laughter and music; some of them could make you a fair speech on the pleasures of a good drink of water or a patch of wild raspberries. While the wickedness of the flesh was preached from the pulpit, the young husbands and wives and the courting couples sat thigh to

⁵⁹ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 160.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 160.

thigh, full of yearning and joy, and the old people thought of the beauty of the children. And when church was over they would go home to Heavenly dinners of fried chicken, it might be, and creamed new potatoes and creamed new peas and hot biscuits and butter and cherry pie and sweet milk and buttermilk. And the preacher and his family would always be invited to eat with somebody and they would always go, and the preacher, having just forsworn on behalf of everybody the joys of the flesh, would eat with unconsecrated relish.⁶¹

Jayber sees the goodness of these things and while a Gnostic rendering of the evils of the world was being preached from the pulpit, Jayber found a very different ideology in the beauty of the church. The church service makes him see and more fully grasp the beauty of the Membership. He especially enjoys the singing. “I loved the different voices all singing one song, the various notes and qualities, the passing lifts of feeling, rising up and going out forever.”⁶² He finds deep pleasure in the audible manifestation of different people coming together to form a common sound. Moreover he says, he,

Thought that some of the hymns bespoke the true religion of the place... What they came together for was to acknowledge, just by coming, their losses and failures and sorrows, their need for comfort, their faith always needing to be greater, their wish... to love one another and to forgive and be forgiven, their need for one another's help and company and divine gifts, their hope (and experience) of love surpassing death, their gratitude.⁶³

Jayber loves the hymns because they are a physical representation of the community. The common tune of the hymn binds the voices together, the common theme of the song binds the hearts and souls together, just as the common *place* binds the people together. Jayber also describes other kinds of beauty he enjoys when the church is empty. “I would see the light falling unbroken on the scarred and carved and much-repainted old pews—

⁶¹ Berry, *Jayber*, 161.

⁶² *Ibid*, 162.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 162-63.

well, it was lovely.”⁶⁴ The physical beauty—manifested audibly, tangibly, visually—leads to a mystical experience that shows the richness of the Membership. “I saw all the people gathered there who had ever been there...I saw them in all the times past and to come, all somehow there in their own time and in all time and in no time...I seemed to love them all with a love that was mine merely because it included me.”⁶⁵ This all comes from a firm grounded-ness; not through the throwing off of this earthly world, as the preachers suggest, but through an appreciation and affection for the beauty of it.

Finally, Jayber’s duty to place instructs his faithfulness to Mattie. Jayber binds himself in a marriage-like way to Mattie, to be the faithful husband that she needs. His marriage-like bond is a separation of realities; Mattie is already married to Troy, and Jayber will never actually marry her. His marriage to her is known only to him. Even so, he remains faithful till death did they part. Though the separation between the reality of his love and care for her and the reality of her real marriage seems a Gnostic separation, it is actually Jayber’s anti-Gnosticism that enables his fidelity.

Gnosticism would disregard the separation of realities, holding one above the other which would lead to unfaithfulness. Because he holds the abstract reality higher than the physical, his love would take precedent over any physical reality of marriage. The Gnostic infiltration into the world has, no doubt, had some bearing on divorce rates. If the thing that matters most is an intangible feeling of desire, not a physical reality of marriage, uttered and written before real witnesses, then one’s duty is distorted leading to faithfulness to the presumed higher good. Though the Gnostic holds this as the highest

⁶⁴ Ibid, 163.

⁶⁵ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 164-65.

good, he cannot remain in this abstract realm; he is a physical creature with bodily desires, and so he ends like the preacher enjoying the pleasures of the flesh with “unconsecrated relish.”⁶⁶ Though some would object to Jayber’s secret marriage saying it is a supreme case of a Gnosticism, in reality the opposite is true; Jayber’s duty to the physical enables him to keep these two realities distinct, keeping himself and Mattie from adultery.

The place instructs their fidelity. Berry equates movement with infidelity. Earlier in the novel, Jayber had noted, “A bachelor barber of limited means in Port William, where most of the entertainment was free, obviously needed to pass downward to Hargrave now and again. And so I bought the car.”⁶⁷ Jayber buys a car, giving himself the means to leave Port William whenever he likes. This freedom of mobility causes a change in Jayber’s demeanor toward place. “My wonderful machine sometimes altered my mind so that I, lately a pedestrian myself, fiercely resented all such impediments on the road...I *hated* anything that required me to slow down.”⁶⁸ He says that, “ease of going was translated without pause into a principled unwillingness to stop.”⁶⁹ The unwillingness to stop is a form of infidelity to Port William. The slow life of the place, the slow life of farmers tending to the place with affection and care “driving their stock across the road,”⁷⁰ presents an impediment to a life of hurry and so in succumbing to a life of hurry, Jayber commits an offense against his place.

⁶⁶ Berry, *Jayber Crow* 161.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 187.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 187.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 187.

This offense is rectified when he forsakes the attractions of Hargrave and commits himself to Mattie Keith. While at a nightclub, he saw Troy, Mattie's husband, with another woman, and it strikes him. First, because he hates to see someone being unfaithful to Mattie. Second, because he sees himself in Troy; though he does not have a wife to be unfaithful to, he has a life and a place that he has forsaken. Confronted with himself in this way, he realizes he must "change or die...give up [his] life or die."⁷¹ He leaves the car and walks back to Port William in the cold and dark night. On the way, in his half-drunken state, he has a conversation with himself, and in it decides to be Mattie's husband, because she needs a faithful man. "So her need then...is to have a faithful husband."⁷² Jayber offers and commits himself to her. After Jayber finds his way home that night, the book never tells of him leaving Port William after this. His faithfulness to Mattie is accompanied by his faithfulness to the town.

To be faithful to a woman who is married to an unfaithful man means to have restrained love. This is why anti-Gnosticism upholds faithfulness even in the midst of a marriage separated from physical reality. Jayber's restraint is aided through his and Mattie's respect for the land. Athey Keith, Mattie's father, had an old oak forest that he saved and set aside and called "The Nest Egg." When Troy took over his father-in-law's farm, this plot of land was one of the only things that he did not use up for his industrial purposes. After Jayber moved to the river he often went to this wood as a place of refuge and peace. "I went to feel the change that that place always made in me."⁷³ During one of

⁷¹ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 239.

⁷² *Ibid*, 242.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 346.

his visits, he met Mattie who was likewise seeking “solace and comfort... a certain quietness.”⁷⁴ After that, the two of them would occasionally meet there. “It is of the utmost importance that you should understand that these meetings were not trysts. They were not planned... They happened only because Mattie and I were alive in the same little world of Port William at the same time, and because both of us loved the Nest Egg.”⁷⁵ This place is the consummation of their love: the physical bond of their relationship. At the same time, it preserves their faithfulness. Jayber and Mattie are both faithful to the land. They are attentive to it and they care for it. When Jayber promised his faithfulness to Mattie, it was a promise to keep himself from all other women but also, in a sense, to keep himself from Mattie as well. That was the demand of the relationship. Unlike Troy who is unfaithful both to Mattie and to the land, Jayber knows his duty and fulfills it. Just as he is attentive to the demands of the place over and above his own desires, he likewise remains faithful to Mattie.

Distraction

Finally, work offers a strong opposition to Gnostic distraction that ends in a sense of purposelessness in the mundane. The Gnostic, thinking meaning and purpose derive solely from the spiritual realm, looks outside of the every day for fulfillment and purpose, distracting him from his duty. The search for fulfillment takes modern Gnostics away from their homes, away from particular places. The search is in vain and leaves people lost, like Virge in *Hannah Coulter*. “Dailiness,” says Kathleen Norris, “can lead to such

⁷⁴ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 346.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 348.

despair and yet also be at the core of our salvation.”⁷⁶ It leads to despair because it is never ending. “Is it not a good joke that when God gave us work to do as punishment for our disobedience in Eden, it was work that can never be finished, but only repeated, day in and day out, season upon season, year after year?”⁷⁷ The desire to escape the daily tasks will ultimately lead to purposelessness and depression because they are never finished. Yet, as Norris says, they are also at the core of our salvation. “We want life to have meaning,” she says, “we want fulfillment, healing and even ecstasy, but the human paradox is that we find these things by starting where we are, not where we wish we were.”⁷⁸ Berry says that “To farm is to be placed absolutely.”⁷⁹ This placement carries with it all kinds of responsibilities. The appreciation of the world as given means that work is a duty, yes, but also that it is a privilege. Christian charity understands that there is an interworking between love and duty. For the Christian, to love *is* a duty—the duty to perform the greatest commandment.⁸⁰ The relationship between the two is reciprocal. As a friend of mine says (who got it from a friend of his who I do not know), “disciplines shape desires and desires come around and shape disciplines.” Duty to a place requires care, care breeds love, love turns around and causes us to dutifully care for the land. Work is done not only out of necessity, but also out of affection.

To live fully, then, does not mean dispensing with the mundane—as Gnosticism holds—and it does not mean merely making time for it either. It means *cherishing* the

⁷⁶ Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 10.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

⁷⁹ Berry, *Imagination in Place*, 10.

⁸⁰ “Love thy neighbor as thyself” –Matthew 22:36.

daily tasks. Washing dishes becomes not a distraction from life, but a meaningful part of it with profound possibility of transcendence. Norris says, “There are days when it seems a miracle to be able to make dirty things clean.”⁸¹ The ordinary becomes fused with beauty when work is valued as worthy. Perhaps this explains the epidemic of purposelessness plaguing the modern world. The daily tasks of washing dishes, or weeding the garden, ought to be considered privileges, as ways to give thanks for fine china and soil to cultivate. Yet Gnosticism holds that these things are in the way and inhibiting the acquisition of something more. Pushing them aside in a consumeristic search for more, the Gnostic is convinced that life—whatever it is—must take place beyond the realm of daily tasks and chores. He despairs when he finally realizes that they are never done.

When Burley shows Jayber the barbershop for the first time, he remarks that he will have his place of living and his place of work right there together. Later, people teasingly say that “it’s hard to tell whether he’s working or living.”⁸² Jayber is doing both. He demonstrates that life and duty are inextricable. He shows that to stay, to abide, to cultivate care through attention to the surrounding world, in short, to invest fully in this life and let the particulars lead to transcendence—this is our duty to be embraced and enjoyed.

⁸¹ Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries*, p. 15.

⁸² Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 124.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pedagogical Ascent from Physical to Spiritual

The Hope of Andy Catlett

Berry has written about numerous fictional characters that share his views of home. The character in Berry's fiction that he most identifies with is Andy Catlett from the short novel *Remembering*. Berry wrote this work in 2008, and it is about Andy Catlett, another member of Port William, who has lost his arm in a farming accident. Andy is a writer and an agrarian, like Berry. They both leave home and return to it with a renewed sense of its worth and bearing on their lives. Andy also shares Berry's year of birth: 1934. Berry deliberately identifies himself with this fictional character. In his most recently published work, *The Art of Loading Brush*, Berry tells the story of Andy's life, making direct parallels to his own. Berry says that, "in 1970, Andy met Gene Logsdon."¹ Gene Logsdon, as aforementioned, is not a fictional character, but a real person who was one of Berry's good friends. In this story, Andy encounters many other real figures that Berry himself encountered, and Andy's life takes a very similar shape to Berry's. In a sense, Berry is telling his own story in a fictionalized way through his pre-existing character, Andy Catlett.

Remembering begins at an agricultural conference at which Andy is speaking and attending. Though this is the initial setting, the novel is abstract and much of the story is disconnected from its setting. The story does not have a chronological sequence

¹ Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 180.

governing its order. Rather, it revolves around a series of remembrances by Andy. Through these memories, Berry creates a sense of disorientation for the reader that resolves with in reorientation when Andy returns home. Andy, like the narrative style of the novel, is adrift by his displacement and his accident. From this disorientation grows hopelessness. Berry shows, in this novel, that hope is found in place and wholeness is found in the Membership.

In *Remembering* Berry shows the displacement of both industrial farming from particular places and of Andy from his particular place. Industrialized farming is displaced because it is disconnected from the particular. Andy calls it an “agriculture of the mind.”² The industrialization spokesman even admits, “There is some breakdown in the old family unit we used to have. The communities are not what they were. I see some small businesses closing down. Farmers have fewer neighbors than they used to have.”³ He does not mourn this loss, however, but simply says that it is “the price of progress.”⁴ Andy realizes how farming has been abstracted from the farmer in this statement. “No farmer is here,” he says. “Everything reducible has been reduced to numbers, and the rest ignored. Nothing that you are talking about, and influencing by your talk, is present here, or can be seen from here.”⁵ In a sweep of Gnostic abstraction, the actual lives and stories of real men have been replaced by numbers. “Adapt or die,” the agri-business man says. “Get big or get out. Sure, not everybody is going to make it. But then, not everybody is

² Berry, *Remembering*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 19.

³ Ibid, 10.

⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁵ Ibid, 19.

supposed to make it.”⁶ It is easy to reduce the harm done to these lives to the mere “price of progress” when the lives and stories are merely theoretical. The harms of industrialization are real to Andy because he knows these people who will not—and apparently are not “supposed” to—make it.

I say damn your systems and your numbers and your ideas. I speak for Dorie Catlett and Marce Catlett. I speak for Mat and Margaret Feltner, for Jack Beechum, for Jarrat and Burley Coulter, for Nathan Coulter and Hannah, for Danny and Lyda Branch, for Martin and Arthur Rowanberry, for Elton and Mary and Jack Penn.⁷

Against this Gnostic abstraction of farming, manifested in the industrialized farming industry, Andy names the people whose lives will be irrevocably damaged by the “adapt or die” mantra. He *places* farming, showing that the displacement of it is not worth the “progress” it claims to bring.

Though Andy places farming, he himself is similarly displaced. He is in a place he does not know and in a place that does not know him. “Only he knows where he is, and he is no place that he knows.”⁸ He is introduced at the conference as “an agricultural journalist” from “Fort William.”⁹ He quickly corrects the speaker and tells him he is from *Port* William. The audience laughs at the correction, seeing it as a minor detail. Andy does not think it is, however, and Berry does not either. It matters that he is away from his home where people do not even know the name of that home.

Andy’s displacement mirrors his dismemberment both of himself and from his community. His accident very literally dismembered him; he lost a bodily member. In a

⁶ Berry, *Remembering*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

⁹ *Ibid*, 18-19.

farming accident, his right hand got caught up in a machine and cut off. Now he views himself as incomplete. “He remembered with longing the events of his body’s wholeness...as Adam remembered Paradise.”¹⁰

In addition to his bodily dismemberment, Andy is also dismembered from his work and the Port William membership. As a writer, the loss of his right hand takes away his ability to write. As a farmer, with only one hand he cannot farm as he used to. These things separate him from his community. More than this, however, he rejects the love and forgiveness of the community, especially that of his wife, Flora. When Flora first comes to comfort him, Andy only asks what they did with his hand and then tells her, “Just leave me alone.”¹¹ Andy casts her off and in so doing, rejects the membership. “Alone was the way she left him. Alone was the way he was, as cast away there in his place as his hand was, wherever it was.”¹² Flora continued to give him grace, and he continued to reject it. Finally she says,

‘Do you know what you need?’ she said to him one day.

“What?”

“Forgiveness. And I want to forgive you. All of us do. And you need more than ours. But you must forgive yourself.”¹³

Andy’s bodily dismemberment precedes a dismembering from his community. He cannot accept the grace, love, and forgiveness they offer him because, as Flora says, he cannot forgive himself.

¹⁰ Berry, *Remembering*, 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

Both of these forms of dismemberment lead Andy to despair. His existence away from home is void of hope. As Berry describes it, it is “a place of eternal hopelessness,” and it is the same kind of hopelessness—arising from abstraction from place—that has worked its way to Andy’s own soul and has commanded a presence over him. He is in a state of incompleteness, “as if he were condemned forever to measure the difference between his life when he was whole and his life now.”¹⁴

Berry suggests that hope and wholeness come through the Membership. The novel tells of Andy’s process of becoming whole and restoring hope through the act of remembering. He recalls the stories of the members who prepared a life for him, stories of the members he knew, and those too old for him to have known. He remembers the care of his grandmother when they gathered the chickens’ eggs in the morning. He remembers Elton Penn “that accurate man, in his year-old grave,” and how he used to say, “if you’re going to talk to me, Andy, you’ll have to walk.” Elton, in saying this, was quoting Uncle Jack, and so when he said this, “it would not be just the two of them talking and listening,” but a history of members, woven together through the common place, and the stories of that place, woven together in a kind of harmony that offers itself to Andy.¹⁵ In this, “he is held, though he does not hold...six generations of his own history, partly failed, and a few dead and living whose love has claimed him forever. He will be partial, and he will die; he will live out the truth of that. Though he does not hold, he is held.”¹⁶ Each member presents an image of hope, and that hope is preserved and passed down through remembrance. Thus in the act of remembering, Andy re-members

¹⁴ Berry, *Remembering*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 48.

himself. Andy recognizes his own partialness and finds his wholeness not in himself, but in the community. When Andy ultimately does return home, his re-membering becomes reality; he replaces himself in the Membership, and in so doing, the despair disperses. That which was dismembered has become re-membered.

Place Cultivating Virtue

In his novels, Berry shows the ability of place to ground one so firmly that the virtues of the place spring up and manifest themselves in the lives of the characters. In a sense, Berry shows how the virtues—faith, hope, and love—spring up from the earth. In *Hannah Coulter* place is cultivated in Hannah by love. Her love grew out of the place and the people in that place. In *Jayber Crow*, Berry shows how work cultivates fidelity and that is shown in Jayber’s faithfulness to Port William, its Membership, and his “marriage” to Mattie. Finally, in *Remembering*, place offers hope.

The danger that Gnosticism seeks to avoid is, of course, idolatry. Perhaps this is a critique of Berry. Burley Coulter critiques a preacher for having “a knack for the Hereafter. He’s not much mixed with this world.” Burley, on the other hand says, “I do say that some people’s knack is for the Here. Anyhow, that’s the talent I’m stuck with.”¹⁷ Writing in an age where the here is valued too little, Berry may overcorrect and concern himself too little with the Hereafter and too much with the Here. Burley continues saying, “I ain’t saying I don’t believe there’s a Heaven...But I do say it ain’t easy to believe. And even while I hope for it, I’ve got to admit I’d rather go to Port William.”¹⁸ This steps

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2001), 104.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

dangerously on the verge of idolatry, perhaps even succumbing to it. However, Berry rightly realizes how the earthly lifts up to the heavenly, and this is a necessary notion to consider in a culture that has by and large discarded it. The Gnostic requires the virtues but avoids the tangible realities and goodness of the world, and offers no real application or explanation of them. Berry shows that duty to place draws one to the world and gives context for having faith, holding onto hope, and receiving and giving love.

Re-Membering Home

The potential problem, however, is that there has been, as Berry calls it, a “cultural watershed”¹⁹ where leaving is now the norm. In such an environment, returning home might not be an option for some. Unlike Berry, whose roots run generations deep, many no longer have ties that go any farther than a generation or two, for most it is even less than that. The disruption between heritage and place is already so great that a return like Virge’s, Jayber’s, or even Berry’s own, seems an impossibility. For those who do not have a home like Port William, the question is “return to where?”

Berry asks not that one tackle large ideological issues solely on an ideological level. The surest way to remain in a cultural epidemic of displacement is to think home can be revalued ideologically and that is all that is necessary. The very thing that causes Berry to value home is the very thing that will save it. Practicality, as it draws people to places, enables a return to the values of home where the fullness of home in this life remains an impossibility. Berry says in “The Work of Local Culture,” that it will not be

¹⁹ Berry, “The Work of Local Culture,” 162.

large-scale government programs that will save local communities; it will have to be the communities themselves.

I know that one revived rural community would be more convincing and more encouraging than all the government and university programs of the last fifty years, and I think that it could be the beginning of the renewal of our country, for the renewal of rural communities ultimately implies the renewal of urban ones. But to be authentic, a true encouragement and a true beginning, this would have to be a revival accomplished mainly by the community itself.²⁰

In the same way, it will be the affection cultivated through work and care of particular places that will re-instill in people a necessary love of home.

Restoring home to a physical place matters to the world because abstraction leads to personal and cultural purposelessness and disorientation. It matters to the Christian because there is a clear pedagogical ascent from physical to spiritual that teaches us to love what we ought and how we ought. Berry reminds and encourages us to abide, to re-value the gifts of life, community, land, and membership, for in these “people live and move and have their being.”²¹ In these we find the gift of work and the blessing of routine duty. Remembering home must not be an ideological pursuit, but rather a cultural shift, growing from the ground up, starting with the culture of particular homes. In combating Gnosticism the duty, then, is to love not Home in a detached, abstract sense, but *your* home, with the peculiarities that only you know. As Berry says, “It would have to be done not from the outside by the instruction of visiting experts, but from the inside by the ancient rule of neighborliness, by the love of precious things, and by the wish to be home.”²²

²⁰ Berry, “The Work of Local Culture,” 160.

²¹ Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 179.

²² Berry, “The Work of Local Culture,” 169.

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