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PRIEST, PROPHET, PILGRIM: TYPES AND DISTORTIONS OF SPIRITUAL
VOCATION IN THE FICTION OF WENDELL BERRY AND CORMAC
MCCARTHY

By

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B.A. Milligan College, 2000
M.Div. Princeton Theological Seminary, 2004

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2011

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 6, 2011

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife

Lisa Edmondson

whose support, encouragement, and love are constant reminders to me of God's
grace at work in the everyday.

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I would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Annette Allen, Dr. Mary Ann Stenger, Dr. David Anderson, and Dr. Norman Wirzba, for providing the perfect balance of encouragement and accountability to make a project like this one possible. I would also like to thank my parents, Jim and Becky Edmondson, who have always encouraged me to learn and to pursue my interests. I am thankful to my father and mother-in-law, Bob and Leora Hendrix, for not only sharing their daughter with me but for also treating me like a son, and for cheering me on throughout this process. I owe a great deal of thanks to the congregation at Lincoln Trail Christian Church, who have taught me for the past seven years what spiritual vocation looks like. And finally, I am so thankful to my wife Lisa and my two children Ella and Micaiah, who are always there to greet me when I come home.

ABSTRACT
PRIEST, PROPHET, PILGRIM: TYPES AND DISTORTIONS OF
SPIRITUAL VOCATION IN THE FICTION OF WENDELL BERRY AND
CORMAC MCCARTHY

Todd Edmondson

May 14, 2011

This dissertation provides a reading of characters in the novels and short stories of two important contemporary American writers through the lens of spiritual theology. While spirituality has often been understood as necessitating a flight from the particular, the concrete, or the everyday, theologians such as Rowan Williams and Nicholas Lash have presented a more robust version of spirituality that understands the call to spirituality not as an invitation to flee from this world, but rather a vocation to a way of life that seeks reconciliation within this world, encountering and embracing God's presence within the contexts of such realities as corporeality, communities, and the created order as a whole. Such an understanding interrogates both ancient and modern forms of gnosticism that have often posed a threat to more orthodox forms of Christian spirituality.

After constructing a theological framework rooted in the work of Williams, Lash, and others, I apply it to literature, arguing that the embodiment of these ideas, and therefore a demonstration of what Christian vocation might look like in

the everyday, is present in the characters who populate the works of Wendell Berry, a Kentucky writer and farmer who has had a troubled relationship with Christianity, but nonetheless identifies himself as a Christian and takes seriously what the Bible has to say about the faithful life. In contrast, the primary influences that shape his characters' worldviews are gnostic in derivation. Thus, McCarthy's characters, in their pursuit of various goals, embody the opposite of Christian vocation in the ways that they relate to the flesh, to community, and to creation. Rather than humbly seeking and encountering God in these contexts, they strive always to transcend them, to overcome creaturely limitations, and to become, in the words of the serpent in the garden, "like God". By comparing these writers, the characters they create, and the worldviews that shape their narratives, I demonstrate, in ways that can be applied to other works and other characters, how the reading of fiction can inform the pursuit of the spiritual life.

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INTRODUCTION

As Dianne Luce has stated in her work *Reading the World*, “Novelist Cormac McCarthy is a philosopher and a poet” (vii). The same could certainly be said of the novelist, poet, essayist, and cultural critic Wendell Berry. As authors with wide-ranging interests and passions, both Berry and McCarthy have carved out unique spaces for themselves in the ways that they present their art, and in the ways they present themselves. Thus in the imaginations of both their readers and their critics, they have become something more than writers. In addition to the cultural roles they fill (willingly or not), there are a number of similarities between the two--their Appalachian roots, a shared interest in taking up themes of human beings’ relationship to place and exploration of the ever-changing dynamic between agrarianism and wilderness, to name just a few examples. However, when one approaches the works of these two authors, it immediately becomes evident that there are some radical differences between them as well.

In terms of their style, their tone, and their depictions of both people and place, the distance between the two men seems almost irreconcilable, so that any kind of extended comparison involving the two might seem to be on shaky ground from the outset. Indeed, such a comparison has been left untried, despite a recent burgeoning interest in the works and in the cultural significance of the two men. Both authors have been writing and publishing in a number of genres for more than five decades, and popular and critical attention to the works of

these two authors is currently at its highest point. In recent years, scholars have explored both their works and their lives through a variety of lenses, each offering some new insight into what makes these writers and their art work. In what follows, I will offer a reading of these two men from a theological perspective--specifically considering the fictional worlds they create and the characters who inhabit those worlds.

Throughout this thesis, I focus specifically on the contributions that the fictional works of these two contemporary American authors make to a discussion of spiritual theology.¹ I will examine three significant physical realities that play an important role in any adequate theology of spirituality: Corporeality, Community, and Creation. Exploration of each of these realities is multivalent, reflecting the numerous roles they play not only in the development of this spiritual framework but also in the life of the Christian. First, these are three realities from which humans are estranged, according to both biblical and modern accounts of sin. Second, these could be viewed as three limitations that define existence for human creatures. Some forms of spirituality seek (to their detriment) to transcend these limitations in order to attain a purer state. Others acknowledge these realities as the necessary contexts in which growth must occur, and thus seek to realize the potential for sacredness in each. Finally, each of these three realities corresponds to a distinct vocation within a vision of the spiritual life. I argue that it is no mere coincidence that both Berry and McCarthy deal extensively with these realities in their writings, or that their characters exhibit patterns of life that are shaped by their approaches to these three realities--ways of being in the world that are, inescapably, both physical and

spiritual.

One of the problems with so-called “spirituality,” both within and outside of Christian contexts, is the manner in which men and women in search of a purer spiritual experience will often fall into the traps and temptations described at length by theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who posit sin as an unchecked desire to transcend our humanity. Instead of recognizing creatureliness and situatedness as limitations in which one might paradoxically--and necessarily--find freedom, too many mystics have sought, by means of special knowledge or abject denial of the flesh, to overcome or escape their humanity, to be like a god in terms of independence or even in terms of a will-to-power that would ultimately seek to manipulate or otherwise devalue other life. The irony is that such a quest will result not in spiritual enlightenment, but rather in a gross distortion of what it means to be a human being, and in a perversion of what it means to live among other creatures.

Theologians Nicholas Lash and Rowan Williams both outline, historically and systematically, some of the ways in which the theory and practice of Christian spirituality can and must be situated within the context of creatureliness.² They reject spiritualities that fail to take seriously the communities of which human beings are a part and the world in which they live, and argue for spiritualities that understand the ethical and political implications of the spiritual life. This is not to say that, in the works of these theologians, spirituality is simply transformed into ethics or politics. While spirituality can never be less than these earthly realities, or fail to engage them, it is not wholly immanent. Instead, these men demonstrate how a spirituality that necessarily

unfolds in this world, within the context of creaturely limitations, is always a response to divine grace and especially, within the Christian narrative, to incarnation.

Such a vision of spirituality recognizes situatedness and embraces the condition of creatureliness, but also understands that these contexts are contained within a larger context of divine love. This divine love expresses itself and invites those who receive it to manifest it in their own bodies, their own communities, and in the created order of which they are a part. The spiritual theologies of Lash and Williams, and the philosophical work of Fergus Kerr³, along with other theologians, historians, and biblical scholars, help to provide a necessary foundation for my discussion of spiritual vocation, as embodied in the priest, prophet, and pilgrim.

After constructing my framework of spiritual vocation, I apply it to the works of Berry and McCarthy. Among the elements of their fictions that invite extended theological reflection is the way in which each author creates characters who wrestle with issues of corporeality, community and creation, and their vastly different responses to these realities. In this reading of Berry and McCarthy, I demonstrate how the characters that these authors create either embody or distort the vocations of priest, prophet, and pilgrim in the ways they relate to their fleshly existence, to the communities around them, and to the natural landscapes they inhabit. Finally, I explore the effects that these characters have on their own contexts, making an argument about the role that their vocations play in shaping certain kinds of communities, and ultimately, in shaping a certain kind of world.

Religious readings of Berry and McCarthy are not new. Almost from the beginning of critical interest in their works, the question of religion and of religious influence in their writings has been broached in a number of books and articles. Some of these critical works have taken an autobiographical approach to exploring Berry's and McCarthy's religious commitments and interests. Janet Goodrich, in her 2001 work *The Unforeseen Self in the Works of Wendell Berry*, examines the widely-held notion that Berry is a cultural prophet, and uses this notion to sketch a picture of Berry's religious development throughout his career. Dianne Luce's 2009 work *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* is the best example any scholar has produced of something like a spiritual biography of the famously reclusive McCarthy. In it, she offers and supports hypotheses about the kinds of material, including religious material (primarily gnostic documents and scholarly reflection on gnostic communities), that McCarthy was likely reading while he was crafting each of his early novels. My own work enters into conversation with each of these works.

Other critical explorations have contributed to the discussion about religion in Berry and McCarthy. J. Matthew Bonzo's and Michael Stevens' *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life: A Reader's Guide*, concentrates mainly on Berry's philosophical or critical work to construct a worldview rooted in Berry's thought. *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters, and *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, edited by Joel Shuman and Roger Owen, offer readings of Berry's works that blend interest in his non-fiction and poetry with interest in his novels and short stories. Among McCarthy critics, Edwin Arnold and Rick Wallach join Luce in reading McCarthy as a religious writer, bringing to

the fore the spiritual questions that his characters pose, both explicitly and implicitly, through their words and their actions. The 1995 book, *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Rick Wallach and Wade Hall, collects the work of several scholars of McCarthy's work, many of whom engage his fiction from within a religious framework. In addition to these works, numerous articles involving theological themes in Berry and McCarthy have appeared in journals like *Christianity and Literature*, *Religion and Literature*, and *First Things*, as well as in more popular outlets like *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today*.

Despite the proliferation of scholarly interest in Berry's and McCarthy's writing, including the religious themes their works explore, to date no one has compared the two in any kind of sustained way. Yet there is much to be gained by such a comparison--not just because of the differences between them, but also because of the similarities. I read Berry and McCarthy as actually having similar convictions about the world, and perhaps even holding to the same basic vision of the good; however, they create narratives and characters that express opposing sides of that vision. Berry seems to show what might be possible if people embrace a certain way of life, while McCarthy seems to depict what is all-too-likely to occur, simply because people will continue living as they nearly always have. Perhaps it is an exaggeration to call one a prophet of hope and the other a prophet of doom; but inasmuch as the fictional works of each serve to call readers to embody certain ways of life, such designations may not be as questionable as they appear.

Furthermore, while scholars have explored religious themes in the novels

and stories of Berry and McCarthy, the characters that these two authors have created over the better part of six decades have not been examined in relationship to spiritual vocation, or their response to a calling to embody a certain way of life. Looking at Berry's and McCarthy's characters is instructive in light of what they teach about fulfilling or rejecting, living into or failing to live into certain patterns of life. Thus, it becomes possible, especially when these two authors are read in conversation with theologians, to see how, within the context of storytelling, they make some profound statements about spiritual life, and about what it looks like for human beings, living in community with other human beings, to either embrace or despise their responsibilities and connections to earthly realities.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, I construct my theological framework, which I will later apply to my readings of Berry and McCarthy. As stated earlier, my primary concern in this section is with developing and articulating an argument regarding what is often called "spiritual" theology, or a philosophy of spirituality. This will involve, at least to some extent, clarifying how I use the term "spirituality". Along the way, I will look briefly at some different ways of approaching spirituality, defined most broadly as the union between the human being and some aspect of the divine, the ultimate, or--most simply--the good. Some of these ways will see the quest for the ultimate or the good as a matter of transcending the three "physical" categories that I believe are necessary for understanding "spiritual" development: corporeality, creation, and community; others will embrace these realities as essential contexts for such development. By examining what theologians from the mid-twentieth (Tillich, Bonhoeffer,

Niebuhr) and early twenty-first century (Williams, Lash, Kerr) have to say on these matters, I will be able to construct, in the second chapter, my three-fold framework of types of spiritual vocation.

This chapter contains two sections. In the first section, I address the fundamental problem of sin as reflective of the human condition of alienation or estrangement. This notion has always been present, but seems to have emerged more fully within the context of conversations between Christian theology and twentieth century thought, when the notion of estrangement became important for thinkers in a variety of disciplines, including theology. Paul Tillich, in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, explores the theological implications of estrangement most fully, but the matter is also taken up by a number of other modern theologians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr.

All three of these formidable thinkers employ the biblical language of sin to their understanding of this universal problem. Furthermore, each of these men characterizes sin, and the estrangement that is tied to it, as a human unwillingness to recognize or to accept our limitations and responsibilities not as evil but as part of our creatureliness and our situatedness within God's good creation. To understand sin and estrangement in this way is to acknowledge that there are real, earthly, physical consequences bound up with this "spiritual" issue, an acknowledgment that will be significant for my argument.

In the second part of this chapter, I look briefly at distinct, and sometimes competing, ways of approaching the spiritual quest, or the quest for a connection with the divine, and the implications these modes of spirituality have for humanity's condition of estrangement. Throughout this discussion, with the aid of

authors like Lash, Williams, and Kerr, I will show that the alienation or estrangement that human beings feel between themselves and the earth, each other, and their own fleshly existence is not a secondary concern of the mystic or the spiritual seeker. Rather, this concern is at the heart of the spiritual quest, and ultimately at the heart of any attempt to find ultimate meaning.

According to the line of reasoning advanced by these thinkers, men and women who adopt a spiritual path that allows them to avoid confronting their physical, earthly estrangements, so that they might embrace a “purer spirituality”, a way that allows them to despise their creatureliness, to flee their situatedness, and to transcend their finitude, all in pursuit of something greater, will be consigned to wander perpetually, unable to grasp this mythical “pure spirituality”. What is worse, in their wanderings, these individuals will engage in practices of politics, ethics, economics that are marked by a contempt for this world and those who inhabit it, creating broken and distorted communities in the process. On the other hand, those who understand their limitations, especially those limitations which accompany the state of creatureliness in a physical world, and those who seek to embrace the manifestations of the spiritual, or the good, or the ultimate, within these limitations--confronting their alienation and estrangement, seeking reconciliation within the structures of creation, fleshly existence, and communal life--will find some measure of satisfaction in their spiritual pursuits, and will also create healthy or redemptive communities.

I complete this section by exploring the possibilities inherent in understanding spirituality as a matter of vocation. I reflect on the notion that vocation is in some sense necessarily bound to specific contexts. The way in

which one fulfills a vocation will both grow out of his or her context and will in some sense serve to shape his or her community. This will be significant both for my study of Berry's and McCarthy's contexts, which influenced their writing, and for the ways in which their characters shape the fictional communities and worlds they inhabit.

In the second chapter, I introduce and develop my own triad, which I will later apply to the fictional worlds of Berry and McCarthy. In this section, I define and illustrate my conceptions of Priest, Prophet, and Pilgrim. I also discuss why these figures are important, and what they might add to an understanding of spiritual life and the roles that fictional characters play in shaping the fictional worlds they inhabit. Thus, the overall aim of the first two chapters is to lay the necessary groundwork of a spiritual theology that will enter into a two-way conversation with the fictional works of Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy.

In the third chapter of the dissertation, I address more extensively the question of why comparing these two authors, Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy, is a fruitful exercise at all. What elements of their lives and work make them compelling conversation partners? In this chapter, therefore, I discuss the cultural and theological similarities and differences between these two writers. I begin by looking briefly at their origins, at the Appalachian culture that shaped both of them, as well as their education and early careers in the mid-twentieth century, considering the philosophical and social implications of that time. In order to argue convincingly that these two writers belong in the same discussion, I discuss some of the ways that their similar (though not identical) social and religious cultures have come to bear on their writing, on the fictional worlds and

the characters that they have created. Also seminal to the discussion is the manner in which these two authors, from similar backgrounds, have carved out their own distinct ways of looking at, or reading the world, ways that are exceedingly different from one another. This will involve considering both the cultural myths and archetypes and the religious convictions that each author has been influenced by and which shape their characters.

The ultimate aim of this chapter is to reflect on how the cultural and religious influences that Berry and McCarthy share, as well as those which they do not, come to bear on their respective treatments of the three physical/theological categories with which my argument is concerned--creation, corporeality, and community. While I read Berry and McCarthy as sharing some of the same perspectives on these realities, the figures that dominate Berry's and McCarthy's works do not. These differences seem to be rooted in contrasting visions of what the human response to our limitations and our potential for transcendence (both elements of 'spirituality') should be. By looking more deeply at both the cultural and religious foundations of these two authors' visions of the world and humanity's place in it, including humanity's quest for what is ultimate, I hope to provide the groundwork for exploring their fictional characters and communities in the application section of the work.

In the fourth through sixth chapters, using the framework I have constructed--the triad of priest, prophet, and pilgrim--I examine specific characters in the specific novels and short stories of these two authors to demonstrate how their characters' ways of being in the world, and more significantly, their ways of pursuing the good (or fleeing the bad) through some

variation of the mystical or spiritual quest, result in the creation and perpetuation of distinct communities, social structures, and fictional worlds. These chapters, engage most closely the texts of Berry and McCarthy, along with the fine critical work that other scholars have produced out of their examinations of the novels and short stories, bringing these works of scholarship into a conversation with the theological material that has shaped my reading.

The conclusion will demonstrate how each of these authors, who create very different characters inhabiting very different fictional worlds, have a powerful word to speak to our own context. Both authors resist easy and neat categorization; instead, they seem to offer contrasting visions toward the same end. It is possible (and I would say highly likely) that both men are dismayed by what is so often called spirituality, and are equally contemptuous of what results from such spirituality. Yet, the way they express their contempt is as distinct as their literary styles. Thus, it might be possible to call Berry a prophet of hope and McCarthy a prophet of doom, so that Berry's characters emphasize, in the manner of the carrot (or Dante's rein), what is possible while McCarthy's characters highlight, in the manner of the stick (or Dante's whip), the ways in which we destroy, by our corruptions, what is possible. What will emerge, then, is a developing conversation between theology and literature that I believe will be fruitful to both.

CHAPTER 1

As a preliminary step toward developing my triad of Christian, spiritual vocation--Priest, Prophet, Pilgrim--which I will apply to my readings of Berry's and McCarthy's characters and communities, it is important to explore some key ideas within Christian spirituality. The following discussion of several theological issues will help to lay the groundwork for my vocational triad, because of the following ways that each member of the triad--priest, prophet, pilgrim--exists in relationship to a set of theological concerns that orbit the discussion of estrangement and embodiment:

First, each of these vocations is significant in the way that it embraces a particular reality that could either be a context for estrangement or one in which embodied spirituality unfolds. Thus the priest inhabits and embraces the context of corporeality; the prophet inhabits and embraces community; and the pilgrim inhabits and embraces creation. Second, each of these vocations embodies in a particular way a virtue that not only shapes the individual in a "spiritual" sense, but also comes to bear on one's way of being in the world and of relating to other creatures. Thus the priest embodies an incarnate and sanctifying compassion; the prophet justice; and the pilgrim wonder.

Finally, each of these vocations, in order to realize its potential for embodied spirituality, must resist a particular temptation, involving the transgression of creaturely limitations. To give in to these temptations would be

to distort or corrupt one's vocation, as McCarthy's characters so vividly demonstrate, and would exacerbate the state of estrangement that spirituality should seek to reconcile. For the priest, the temptation will be to the exercise of predatory power, perhaps resulting from a confusion or an embarrassment concerning the flesh, which would lead the priest to consume or to destroy those in his care. For the prophet, the temptation will be toward a triumphalistic brand of futurism, a tendency to use language to cast a vision of a future world in which the poor and neglected, the weaker members, have no place. For the pilgrim, whose life is one of movement, the temptation will be toward flight--to run away from something, to yearn so strongly for some far-off destination that the journey becomes a nuisance or even a misery, rather than an important aspect of one's growth, development, or reconciliation.

In this chapter, therefore, I touch upon a number of important themes that will help to shape a discussion of Christian spirituality going forward: sin and its relationship to estrangement; the problem of a dualistic view of spirituality; the possibility of embodied, reconciling spiritualities; and the place of vocation in the spiritual life.

ESTRANGEMENT AND SIN IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

This conversation between religion and literature begins with the problem of estrangement. While philosophical, technological, linguistic, and biological explanations states of estrangement in both the ancient and modern world are myriad, my interest lies primarily in the theological explanation. Within a theological perspective, estrangement might be defined as those rifts that exist between human beings and a number of other realities and that affect a number

of relationships. These rifts or estrangements, unless they undergo reconciliation, inevitably lead to troubled ways of being in the world. Theologically speaking, these rifts stem from, and are in some sense a part of, humanity's separation from God. Thus according to a number of prominent theologians, human beings are estranged creatures. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, a time in which awareness of this estrangement increased with every passing day and with every new social, political, and technological development, theologian Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* offered a concise acknowledgment of the problem: "The state of existence is the state of estrangement" (44). And what makes this estrangement so profound is the fact that human beings essentially belong to that from which they are estranged (45).⁴

This state of estrangement, as thinkers past and present have demonstrated, is manifest in myriad ways. In the interest of developing a theological/spiritual framework for reading the fictional works of Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy, a framework that takes seriously the estrangements that have come to shape human existence, I will focus on three of these manifestations. The patterns of estrangement mentioned below are not meant to be exhaustive, but merely illustrative. I have chosen these because they not only point to tangible and observable crises of estrangement in both the historical and contemporary human condition, but also bear significantly on both an understanding of spirituality and on the fictional worlds and characters that Berry and McCarthy create.

First, human beings are estranged from themselves as fleshly creatures. This is best expressed in the long-recognized dualism between soul and body, a

dualism that affects the way human beings view themselves in some profound yet subtle ways. As Adam Cooper states, "The body has suffered a terrible fate. The body has been destabilized and emptied of its intrinsic meaning" (2). The divide between who people envision themselves to be as rational, spiritual beings, and who they are as men and women with fleshy parts--arms, legs, bones, hair, and organs--has widened to the point of robbing the body of any measure of significance beyond that possessed by meat.

To his credit, although Cooper speaks of a "landscape currently swathed in darkness and confusion over questions about the body," and he asserts that "never in the history of humanity has the rift between body and soul, science and faith, individual and communal, been so keenly felt", he admits that this is not a new problem (148). This divide is deeply embedded in humanity's ways of looking at the world. And while this brand of estrangement might have manifest itself in new and more aggressive ways in recent decades, it is bound up with ancient forms of thought, particularly strains of gnosticism, just as strongly as with newer perspectives. Furthermore, it is not easy to pin the blame for this type of dualism on any one agent or ideology. Every age produces a worthy culprit--from gnosticism to Cartesian philosophy to industrialism to the internet and virtual reality--all of which are certainly blameworthy and ripe for critique on various fronts. Yet for every culprit named, there are many that have simply become so much a part of life as to escape detection. But the fact that this form of estrangement, this detachment from our flesh, has grown familiar does not make the necessity of addressing it any less urgent. The ramifications of these ways of looking at the flesh, are far-reaching and destructive, as McCarthy's fiction in

particular will powerfully demonstrate.

Second, people are estranged from community, from healthy fellowship with other human beings. Peter and Brigitte Berger have commented on the acceleration of life, the uprooting of communities, and the migratory existences that human beings inhabit in an industrial and technological age, and the ways in which these conditions exacerbate our sense of social homelessness (182-184). However, this disconnectedness from others stretches back to the first moment when one human being realized that he or she stood apart from another, and knew that this knowledge, this awareness, could be used for personal, rather than communal, gain. In fact, according to Thomas Finger, social estrangement is fundamental to a troubled human existence; it is social estrangement, the ways in which people are cut off from others and the manner in which they are unable to form healthy communities, that gives birth to other forms of estrangement and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to overcome other types of alienation (101).

The spectrum of responses to this social form of estrangement is wide. At its most benign, the estrangement humans feel from one another will lead them to be withdrawn and isolated, yearning for human contact but unable to develop healthy relationships. At its worst, this estrangement might turn contemptuous or even murderous, as dangerous narcissism robs humans of respect for the lives and the well-being of others. However felt, it is evident that the loss of meaningful human connection is a defining characteristic of life in this world, one which should not be neglected.

Finally, people are estranged from the physical world. Many human beings have lost a sense of belonging within a natural order. This is perhaps most

evident in the ways they so often view the places they occupy: not as hospitable environments in which they might do good work, but rather as storehouses of resources and raw materials. This estrangement is also evident in the enmity that many human beings feel toward the non-human world, a fear not characterized by sublime awe toward something unpredictably beautiful, but rather by dread toward something uncontrollable and chaotic. Finally, this estrangement is present in even the most well-intentioned ways that people discuss the created order. As Ben Quash has pointed out, when men and women speak about the physical world as something 'over against us,' as something from which they are by definition distinct--even when they speak of the environment as a problem that they can manage, as though from outside--this reinforces a dualism between humans and something which they have chosen to call 'nature', a dualism which only illuminates and exacerbates their estrangement and, again, leads to more problematic ways of being in the world (306).

These ideas offer nothing more than a brief sketch of some of the forms of estrangement that are experienced in every day of human existence. Each of these forms of estrangement plays an important part in the fictions of Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy, and the ways in which their characters respond to these estrangements shape the fictional worlds they inhabit. As the effects of these estrangements are widespread and diverse, so are the causes. Here, it may come as a surprise that modern theologians have not hesitated to designate the estrangement that humans have always felt, and which has become more pronounced in recent generations, as the fruit of sin. If sin seems like an outdated or quaint notion to apply to the far-ranging dilemmas facing humanity, it

has not seemed so to some of the most significant theological voices of the past century. Indeed, one of the great strengths of theology in the modern age has been its willingness to address human estrangement from within the context of religious narrative, to use the stories that religious communities tell about the world to address the crises that cultures face.

Tillich's awareness of social, cultural, and historical states of estrangement, an awareness which plays a significant role in shaping his theology of culture, may have been influenced by his readings of Hegel, Marx, and other more recent thinkers, but his theological perspective on estrangement was clearly rooted in the biblical testimony at the heart of his Christian faith. This is revealed, early in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, in his response to the question, "What is the relation of the concept of estrangement to the traditional concept of sin?":

Estrangement is not a biblical term but is implied in most of the biblical descriptions of man's predicament. It is implied in the symbols of the expulsion from paradise, in the hostility between man and nature, in the deadly hostility of brother against brother, in the estrangement of nation from nation through the confusion of language, and in the continuous complaints of the prophets against their kings and people who turn to alien gods. Estrangement is implied in Paul's statement that man perverted the image of God into that of idols, in his classical description of 'man against himself,' in his vision of man's hostility against man as combined with his distorted desires. (45)

Within this reading of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, starting with the Genesis narrative of Creation and Fall, Tillich makes room for some of the contexts of estrangement already mentioned, which figure so prominently in the writings of Berry and McCarthy, and with which any adequate philosophy or theology of spirituality must reckon. He addresses the hostility between man and the natural world, hostility between “brothers”, and even one’s hostility against the self and its ‘distorted desires’, which are most often conceived, in the New Testament and later, as desires of the flesh, rooted in inadequate or unhealthy responses to corporeality. And even in Tillich’s thoroughly modern system, it is evident that over all this estrangement, or rather at the bottom of this estrangement, is humanity’s estrangement from God. This estrangement is a result of humanity’s rebellion against the very God who gave them the freedom to rebel. This rebellion is what biblical faith calls sin.

It should be clarified that Tillich does not identify estrangement with sin, or consider the newer term an appropriate replacement for the older one. He acknowledges that the word sin has been grossly misused, particularly as it has come to be understood merely as deviation from moral laws, thus losing its power to define the human condition. However, he asserts that while the word sin must be reinterpreted, it must also be retained, not just for sentimental or traditional reasons, but because it alone ‘has a sharpness which accusingly points to the element of personal responsibility in one’s estrangement’ (46). In other words, the concept of sin allows human beings to talk about estrangement as an ethical, rather than a fatalistic, dilemma. As he further states, “[Estrangement] is not a state of things, like the laws of nature, but a matter of

both personal freedom and universal destiny” (46).

Tillich thus explores a series of attitudes or sinful dispositions at the heart of estrangement, among them the classical idea of hubris. He defines hubris as the self-elevation of humanity into the sphere of the divine, a self-elevation that originates in one's unwillingness to accept finitude, or situatedness in the world (50). This unwillingness prompts a desire in humanity to transcend itself, to exceed limitations by placing itself at the center of the universe, in the process becoming a god (49). John J. Thatamanil states that in Tillich's system, “When human beings exercise their freedom in separation from God, the consequences of separation lead ultimately to estrangement...In this process, separated creatures make themselves centers of their own lives and then attempt to draw everything else into that center” (20-21). Elsewhere, Thatamanil points out that for Tillich, hubris is not just one form of sin, but rather sin in its total form. It is a turning toward the self that is not accomplished only by one part of the human, but by the whole human. It is in totality that one makes the self the center of the world (122). This notion of sin and estrangement as bound up with a hubris that would push humanity toward an unnatural, even destructive desire to transcend limitations occupies an even more central position in the work of other theologians, explored below, and is also a prominent theme in the works of Berry and McCarthy.

Throughout his discussion of sin and estrangement, Tillich upholds the frequently cited distinction that ‘sins,’ understood as ‘special acts which are considered as sinful,’ are really expressions of ‘sin’. While the former might be seen as singular events or transgressions, the latter could be defined as the

power and the manifestation of “man’s estrangement from God, from men and from himself” (Thatamanil 122). The two concepts, estrangement and sin (in the larger sense), are intimately, even inextricably linked in Tillich’s thought, so that it becomes possible to see the reconciliation of estrangement (which might be classified as a philosophical or existential problem) as an integral or necessary ingredient in the defeat of sin (a theological problem). In a statement that signifies the relationship between the two, he claims that “In faith and love, sin is conquered because estrangement is overcome by reunion” (Thatamanil 22).

Thus, while estrangement is depicted in Tillich as a deeply rooted component of human existence, it can be overcome. However, lest people make this healing or this overcoming of estrangement a wholly immanent event, Tillich reminds readers that this alienation can never be overcome by human power or will. As Andrew Finstuen argues, Tillich rejects the Hegelian notion that humanity and the world are journeying towards a realization of goodness and a closer unity with the infinite. Humanity’s sinful state, and the existential predicament that they are in, make such a journey impossible. The march toward goodness cannot originate from the human side (71). Because people are so consumed by estrangement, they cannot appeal to one dimension of their lives (not even to spirituality) to save them (127).

According to Terry Cooper, Tillich was unwilling to abandon the theological/religious understanding of the human state for a psychological one. Tillich’s hope that humanity’s alienation or estrangement might ultimately be overcome could never rest solely on human activity; this would simply be a repetition of the sin of hubris which lies at the very heart of human estrangement.

Rather, the estrangement from the source, from God, must first be healed, through that God's acceptance of humanity even in its estrangement; only then can the other forms of alienation that mark existence undergo redemption (127-128). Therefore, as Finstuen points out, despite Tillich's commitment to political and ethical engagement with the problems his society faced, the spiritual or religious life as he envisioned it can never collapse completely into ethics or politics. Rather, where the spiritual life begins for the human being is in an awareness and acknowledgment of God's acceptance, which can only come through grace; without this, humanity would continue to languish in guilt over its estrangement (80).

The connection between sin and estrangement is present in the work of other theologians, as well--contemporaries of Tillich who offer their own perspectives on the effects of sin in shaping the human condition. In his discussion of the Genesis 3 narrative of creation and fall, Dietrich Bonhoeffer uses the language of cosmic tragedy when he talks of a 'cleavage that now splits the world apart for Adam' (113). It is not difficult to read 'cleavage' as a form of estrangement, or at least as closely related to the concept. This cleavage emerges when Adam faces the freedom to choose between God's word, which defines human limitations ('You will surely die'), and the serpent's word, pointing toward unlimitedness ('You will surely not die').

For Bonhoeffer, the origins of this cleavage extend beyond the decision of whether to eat the 'forbidden fruit'; thus, sin becomes more than a singular act of disobedience. The decision for sin in Bonhoeffer's interpretation is the decision that Adam and Eve face between two ways of being godlike while also human.

The first way, ordained by God when humanity was created *Imago Dei*, Bonhoeffer defines as being “in the image of God in being for God and the neighbor,” and later, as “the creature living in the unity of obedience” (113). The second way of being like God, which Bonhoeffer terms *Sicut Deus*, would make ‘humankind similar to God in knowing out-of-its-own self about good and evil, in having no limit and acting out of its own resources...in its being alone’ (113). It is this second way that Adam and Eve both choose, and in doing so choose to enter into a state of being in which they have no limit, and having no limit--and therefore no creatureliness--they are alone (115).

For Bonhoeffer, then, what is most significant about sin, and what ultimately leads to estrangement, is the unwillingness of humanity to accept creaturely limitations: “Humankind’s being *sicut deus* after all includes precisely not wanting to be a creature” (116). The very existence of prohibition (against eating the fruit), with which Adam and Eve had to reckon, was meant not to deny humanity its freedom, but rather to provide freedom in obedience, freedom within limitations, freedom in creatureliness--the freedom to be distinct from the creator, and happy within the context of that distinction. When Adam and Eve sought to transgress their limitations and thereby to transcend their creatureliness, they forfeited their freedom; in their new context, standing in the divide between good and evil, they are alone. They are estranged (117). This estrangement is not only realized in the moment of their transgression; it is also exacerbated in the moment when they seek to flee from the truth of what they have done. When they hide from the Lord in the garden, or when they attempt to twist the truth with which they are confronted--in Bonhoeffer’s words, falling back on the trick they

learned from the serpent of correcting what is in God's mind (129). These actions, far from bringing healing to the situation, only deepen the divisions between themselves and God, each other, and the world in which they live.

Like Tillich, Bonhoeffer envisions the estrangement between man and God, effected by the transgression of the boundary between creature and creator, as having implications for other relationships as well. With the introduction of both shame and obsession into the sexual relationship between the man and the woman, two forms of estrangement come to light. First, the attempt to cover their bodies (which signifies both an acknowledgment and a hatred of their limits) marks a certain distorted attitude toward their existence as fleshly creatures. Second, Bonhoeffer points to the obsessive desire bound up with a corrupted sexuality. This is a desire that motivates one creature not to enter into mutual relationship with another, but to possess the other completely, and thereby 'denies and destroys the creaturely nature of the other person' (123); this, according to Bonhoeffer, is another symptom of a deep estrangement at work within the realm of human community.

Finally, Bonhoeffer illustrates how the estrangement between humanity and God also manifests itself in the relationship between humanity and the natural world:

Now, thirdly, the word directed to Adam proclaims the destruction and dividedness of the original relation between humankind and nature and the alienation that takes its place...The earth comes to mean for Adam worry, woe, toil, and enemy...the work that human beings do on the ground that is cursed comes to express fallen

humankind's state of dividedness from nature...(133-134)

Where before, Adam and Eve had been expected to live within creation, as part of that creation, with responsibilities for that creation born of communion with both creation and creator, their sin of rejecting their creaturely limits has served to upset that balance. There now exists not just the potential, but also the likelihood that Adam will live over against creation, perhaps even in a state of enmity towards it, as he toils for his sustenance on the land that was created to be much freer with its gifts.

The concept of estrangement as concomitant with sin, and of sin as concomitant with humanity's desire to grasp at any means of transcending the status of creatureliness, is also found in the work of a third significant twentieth-century theologian. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, a work that owes a considerable debt to Tillich's influence (Finstuen 72), Reinhold Niebuhr articulates the Christian view of humanity:

The Christian view of man is distinguished from other views by the manner in which it interprets and relates three aspects of human existence to each other: (1) It emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual stature in its doctrine of image of God. (2) It insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without, however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil in man. In its purest form, the Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual

dimensions of his existence and may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life. (3) It affirms that the evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and admit his insecurity, an unwillingness which involves him in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity from which he seeks escape. (150)

One would be hard-pressed to find a more succinct, yet comprehensive, analysis of humanity in regard to its relationship to God, to self, and to its place as part of the created order. In particular, Niebuhr's third point makes it clear that the human being, in freedom, refuses to acknowledge dependence on something greater than the self, or to accept finitude. This unwillingness is what ultimately gives birth to and nurtures both the pride and the insecurity that define the human condition and from which, in our awareness of their condition, men and women seek relief.

Later, just as Bonhoeffer spoke of the freedom that could be found in the divine prohibition, Niebuhr will affirm that the 'finiteness, dependence, and the insufficiency of man's mortal life' are not in themselves reason for despair, but rather 'belong to God's plan of creation and must be accepted with reverence and humility' (167). He rejects the common perception that, were it not for sin, humanity would never have experienced natural death, would never have returned to dust, as 'almost identical with the Hellenistic belief that nature and finiteness are themselves evil' (175). Thus, for Niebuhr, limitations--even the ultimate limitation represented by physical death--are not consequences of sin or

corruptions of God's good creation, but rather, insofar as these limitations relate to human creatureliness, are part of that good creation. Human finiteness, while it is the context in which temptation and sin arise, is not the precondition for temptation and sin; rather, the precondition for temptation and sin is anxiety, humanity's insecurity about its place in the world:

Man is insecure and involved in natural contingency; he seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human creatureliness. Man is ignorant and involved in the limitations of a finite mind; but he pretends that he is not limited. He assumes that he can gradually transcend finite limitations until his mind becomes identical with the universal mind. All of his intellectual and cultural pursuits, therefore, become infected with the sin of pride. (178-179)

And later, Niebuhr states, "Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin" (182). Yet anxiety, Niebuhr argues, is not sin. Human anxiety for Niebuhr, while perhaps not as organic to humanity as finiteness, is nonetheless inevitable. Even anxiety has both creative and destructive elements, which are not easy, or even possible always, to separate (184).

It would seem, then, that one of the primary tasks that humanity faces in the world, is not to deny that such anxiety exists. Rather, one must prevent that anxiety from giving way to pride, which can all too easily become a will-to-power which one seeks to exercise over against God and neighbor. If Niebuhr is sometimes charged with giving undue attention to the sin of pride, says Finstuen, it may be because he saw pride as the primal sin, the disposition whereby people

seek to make themselves into God (76). Such a disposition would distort everything else that one does, including spiritual or religious pursuits, as Niebuhr demonstrates in his discussion of self-righteousness. Moral pride, according to Niebuhr, results in a distorted view of oneself as righteous, without sin. And because, like Tillich, Niebuhr denies that human beings could overcome estrangement without grace, this form of pride is the greatest deception, and therefore the greatest temptation, to which humanity can fall prey (Finstuen 76).

Each of these three important twentieth-century theologians--Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Niebuhr--articulated a message about how the problem of sin comes to bear on the estrangement that human beings experience, the sense of not being at home in their bodies, in communities, and in the created world. Furthermore, each man spoke, in his own way, about how sin--and therefore estrangement--originates in the way human beings respond to their status as finite, limited, and situated creatures. This problem, I would argue, is at the heart of an adequate theology of spirituality, and is also at the heart of the stories that Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy tell.

EMBODIMENT AND THE PROBLEM OF DUALISM IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

In a manner similar to the concept of estrangement, spirituality--another notion with a long history of interpretation and misinterpretation--has undergone something of a renaissance in recent decades. In order to keep up with the rapidly expanding interest in spirituality, scholars have generated a myriad of hypotheses to explain the unlikely turn toward the spiritual, made all the more unlikely by the fact that numerous voices continue to profess that humanity has

entered a 'secular' age. At least one of these hypotheses involves the idea that spirituality is seen by many as an alternative to religion. For some, this means a rejection of religious institutions; for others, this posits spirituality as a way of connecting to the divine or the transcendent without having to give assent to the doctrines or dogmas of the Church or some other religious authority (Austad 7-8). For some, this sudden interest in spirituality is cause for celebration; for others, it is a matter that provokes caution, concern, and perhaps even criticism.

At the heart of current criticisms of spirituality is the charge of dualistic thought. Dualism as a concept can be applied to a movement or a trend in a variety of ways. One may speak of dualism as a divide between the transcendent and the immanent, between mind and matter, between body and soul, or between the physical and the spiritual. Each of these forms of dualism has a long history, bound up with various philosophies from Plato to Descartes and beyond. Each has a tendency to drive a wedge into any philosophical or theological debate, effectively creating an impasse. And each comes to bear on the ways people might envision themselves as spiritual creatures, or the ways in which they might imagine the spiritual journey or the quest for the ultimate. Two contemporary theologians, Rowan Williams and Nicholas Lash, explore the ways in which dualistic thought has invaded and defined Christian reflection on spirituality. They are particularly concerned with how such thinking creates a divide in the ways men and women understand religious experience, effectively creating two classes of believers--the exceptional and the ordinary. As commonly understood, those in the former group somehow transcend their human limitations and experience God in an unmediated way. Those in the latter group,

according to some, experience God second-hand and are therefore accorded little honor or recognition. Both Williams and Lash, employing their respective gifts as historical and philosophical theologians, interrogate this divide.

In his work of Historical Theology, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, Rowan Williams takes a long view of the ways in which the divide between the exceptional and the unexceptional manifests itself in the understanding of Christian spirituality. He argues that the temptation to distinguish between “compromising” activities and spheres (which could include family life, work, the body, and the created world) and “pure” realities (such as the soul, the mind, or ‘heaven’), and to see only the latter as amenable to spirituality, stretches back at least to the world of the New Testament (Williams *Wound* 2). In fact, he understands the early Christian message of the cross as one response to this temptation: for Williams, the Christian doctrine of the death and suffering of Christ is, among other things, an acknowledgment of a God ‘who is present in and works in human failure and helplessness’ rather than a God who only inhabits the realms of glory, transcendence, or the exceptional (5).

The belief that every Christian must imitate Christ in his crucifixion is a reality that, according to Pauline thought, must be acknowledged, recognized, and embraced, not just once but day by day (Williams *Wound* 8). This teaching does not embrace suffering for its own sake, baptizing masochism in religious language; instead, it is a demonstrated awareness that every area of life, including (perhaps especially) those areas one might describe as mundane, humble, even ignominious, are contexts in which the ‘spiritual’ life finds room to

grow. It is not in isolated incidents, or in extraordinary experiences, but rather within the painful limitations of the earthly body, and within the frustrations of community life, that the sort of faith, love, and hope that Paul characterizes as the hallmarks of the spiritual journey, might fully develop.

Williams finds evidence of this perspective in the extra-biblical writings of the later first century as well. Written during a time when literal martyrdom at the hands of the Roman empire or the local governing authorities was an ever-present threat, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch are remarkable in the way they stress the principle that martyrdom--understood by some as the ultimate expression of the spiritual life--is not an isolated episode in the Christian life, nor is it a one-time experience of violent and dramatic suffering. Martyrdom for Ignatius is only the natural culmination of a far more prosaic process, a process that Williams describes as 'un-selfing,' the pouring out of one's egotism on the altar of service to community (*Wound* 17). It is impossible to imagine such a process not involving a daily renewal of commitment, a daily acknowledgment of the process' difficulties as well as its rewards. Again, this is not an ethic of self-hatred, but just the opposite. It is instead a reflection of the Christian belief that by sharing in the suffering of Christ, one embodies and shares in his glory.

In the second century, Williams argues, the stakes were raised in the debate between those who would view salvation, redemption, and spiritual growth as belonging to the realm of the exceptional and those who would argue for its presence in the common realities we engage as human beings. The idea at the heart of this new dynamic was gnosticism, which had been a presence among earlier generations of Christians (both Paul and the author of the

Johannine epistles seem to have written in response to gnostic teachings) as well as in Judaism. That the movement grew both in popularity and in sophistication in the second century explains the ardent response from within mainstream Christianity.

Williams, along with thinkers like Hans Jonas, defines gnosticism in terms of its doctrines of 'the alien God and the alien soul,' and states that the Christian writers of the period rightly saw the teachings as a 'flight from the particular' (*Wound* 17). According to gnostics, the world (the temporal, physical, historical context) in which people live is the result of either accident or malevolence on the part of some heavenly power. It is thus in no way aligned, nor can it ever be aligned, with the purposes of the good God. The only vestiges of goodness in this abortion of a world are to be found within souls: subjects that are capable of understanding, but which are imprisoned within physical bodies and within the natural world. In order to be united to the true God, or to the good, these imprisoned souls must escape from the fleshly and the temporal. Furthermore, such an escape can only be attained via the apprehension of transcendent, unconditioned truth--pure intellectual understanding. Human action, even the actions of a human Christ, are rooted in the corruptibility of flesh and the temporal, historical, particular world, and thus can never impart salvation (*Wound* 17).

Williams argues that this view flies in the face of not only Christian doctrine, but also the Hebrew understanding that God works out God's covenant and salvation within the context of human history rather than outside it. This is not a secondary doctrine for either faith, but rather a *sine qua non*. Thus

Christian writers who responding to gnostic claims focused on the doctrine of the incarnation, and chose to emphasize the particularity of Jesus.⁵ In these formulations, Jesus is not merely an ethereal teacher of universal truth, but rather a Jewish man living at a particular time and in a particular place, nevertheless accomplishing a victory that would be for all people at all times and all places.

According to Williams, the consequence of Irenaeus' demolition of gnostic claims by means of appealing to Christ's incarnation was "to draw attention to the experiences of limitation, contingency, temptation, and both internal and external conflict, as fundamental to the mature life of faith and growth toward God" (*Wound* 30). If what Irenaeus, and mainstream Christianity along with him, claimed about Jesus was true, then the life of Jesus, contra gnostic argument, "sanctified the particular, the spare, and the strange, manifesting God in a conditioned human story. Henceforth, it is clear that the locus of God's saving action...is the world of historical decision...It is not and cannot be in a privileged, de-historicized ecstasy, nor in the mechanisms of a gnostic's spiritual science" (*Wound* 30). Thus Irenaeus won a battle on behalf of the ordinary against the view that it is only within the exceptional that God might work.

But if Irenaeus effectively trumped gnosticism in his time, this certainly does not mean that the dualistic perspectives he combated were put to rest. Williams points to the way in which another group of Christians, centered in third-century Alexandria, were more willing to 'take seriously the gnostic's embarrassment about the fleshly Jesus'. These Christian writers were more influenced both by the Jewish exegete Philo and by the classical, Platonic distinction between intelligible form and material body than they were by

gnosticism proper. Nevertheless, they concluded that to be like Jesus, as every Christian aspired, was not to imitate the earthly Jesus in his love or in his vulnerability, but rather to be like the eternal Word, the divine truth that was veiled, rather than revealed, in the bodily form of Christ (*Wound* 31). The Alexandrians did not deny (as gnostics did) that Jesus had really come in the flesh; they merely ascribed the incarnation to educational necessity; it was a condescension to humanity's immaturity. In order to become mature, however, Christians must move toward an encounter with the eternal *Logos*, unmediated through the bodily form of Jesus of Nazareth (*Wound* 34). In other words, they must transcend their humanity.

Some form of this teaching--influenced by Plato through Augustine, shot through with a perennial confusion over the division between our body and the soul, has persisted within Christianity ever since those earliest generations of believers, through to more recent generations. Thus in his description of medieval Christian spirituality, Williams' most critical examination is reserved for Dionysius, whose system, according to Williams, reduced "the whole sacramental life of the Church to a system of individual enlightenment and had a disastrous effect upon both Western and Eastern liturgical thought and practice" (*Wound* 118). What he accuses Dionysius of accomplishing here is nothing novel; rather than an introduction of some new and dangerous doctrine, it would seem to be a re-introduction of some of the high points of early gnosticism, with its emphasis on individual enlightenment. It is clear, however, that Dionysius' influence was far-ranging and became deeply embedded in the ways that later generations of Christians approached the spiritual. By early modern times,

Williams argues that Christian spirituality on the whole was losing touch with one of its most central convictions--its understanding that in the historical, temporal, and particular suffering of the particular man Jesus of Nazareth, God was revealed.

Thus, Williams summarizes the history of the troubling relationship between a Christianity that wants to affirm the ordinary as a context of spiritual revelation and growth, and a Christianity that would prefer to transcend the ordinary in pursuit of a purer encounter with God. And while Williams will turn to two later figures, Martin Luther and John of the Cross (I will examine his discussion of both below), as examples of those who would battle a dualistic Christianity, it is evident, both to Williams and to other thinkers, that Luther and John did not dispense with this problem within the Christian faith. It persists through modern times and continues to leave its mark on various forms of Christian spirituality today.

While Nicholas Lash would agree that the dualistic perspectives Williams explores have a long history, he explores more fully the effects of such perspectives on spirituality in the modern world. He is especially critical of a division between the ordinary and the extraordinary in Christian spirituality that he sees in the influential work of William James, and that has shaped much discussion of spirituality or mysticism ever since in harmful ways. Particularly dangerous in such an account, according to Lash, is the emphasis on a special mystical state, an experience that is necessarily personal and which has its root and center in a state of consciousness that is by definition incommunicable to others. Lash does not deny that such states exist; however, he questions the

wisdom or the validity of making them central to one's vision of the religious life, dependent as they are on a kind of privacy that undermines rather than encourages the possibility of a healthy or fruitful life among others (64).

Furthermore, he criticizes the way an emphasis on such experiences inevitably excludes many from the possibility of a religious or spiritual life, with serious implications not just for those individuals, but also for the communities and the worlds that they inhabit. If religion, on some accounts:

works well, or at least works best, for that small company of its creative artists, the pattern setters who fulfill, in matters of religion, the evolutionary function of genius...And if it seems, on this account, that few are called and even fewer chosen, this simply indicates within what tightly tragic limits chaos can, in fact, be ordered and destructive darkness held at bay. (87-88)

Throughout his argument, Lash's, primary point of contention with those who would follow a dualistic line of thinking that might be classified as a modern gnosticism is with their tendency to circumscribe some realm of life and experience as truly religious, and then allowing that only exceptional people are finally capable of understanding, much less engaging in, this realm. Such a tendency, Lash argues, does more to distort the notions of religious experience, mysticism, or spirituality, than any institution could.

To understand why certain conceptions of spirituality would invite such pointed criticism from both Williams and Lash, it is helpful to turn to the concepts with which our discussion began, and to draw some connections between sin and estrangement on the one hand, and spirituality on the other. According to

Tillich, Niebuhr, and Bonhoeffer, Christian theology states that sin and estrangement grow out of anxieties about limitations--whether those limitations be the flesh, responsibilities to other human beings, or humanity's place in the created order--and one's refusal to accept those limitations: the free choice to despise them or ignore them in an attempt to become *sicut deus*, like God. As Bonhoeffer argued, the estrangement that results from sin serves to distance humanity further from these realities--cutting people off from a proper understanding of themselves as fleshly bodies, or as members of a community or of a created order.⁶ Therefore, forms of spirituality which continue to despise or ignore those limitations, rather than confronting them as realities demanding to be reconciled, or embracing them as contexts of the sacred, are merely going to aggravate the human predicament, actually working against, rather than toward, some measure of reconciliation in the midst of a divided life. As Lash puts the problem: "If we would find ourselves in the presence of God, we are ill advised to pursue strategies which exacerbate the conditions of his absence from our world"(89).

Like Lash, Williams also advocates spiritual theologies that could be called inclusive, in that they work toward reconciliation with earthly realities and limitations rather than pursuing transcendence or escape from them. In his essay, "On Being Creatures," he argues that "The overcoming of 'nature' as a proper goal for spirituality is highly problematic" (69). Here, the reader is to understand by 'nature' the limitations that are bound up with humans' existence as creatures. Until Christians have a proper doctrine of creation, Williams says, one that acknowledges the place of humanity within the created order, they

cannot fully realize either habits of contemplation or the ethical or political action which is concomitant with those habits. Spirituality will be a constant Promethean striving against God. Men and women will envision the creator as an alien force imposing limitations on unwilling victims, rather than one who gives freedom--within limits--to experience that creator's goodness and love in the ways human beings relate to themselves, to other creatures, and to the world.

If "spirituality" might mirror the wholeness and integrity toward which humans aspire rather than the brokenness and estrangement that is the mark of current existence, what is necessary is a form of spirituality that understands limitations (in the words of Niebuhr) not as evil but as a part of God's good creation of people and of the world. If one would be spiritual in a manner that takes seriously the whole human being as part of a larger creation, then one must seek to understand the ways in which limitations serve as contexts in which the spiritual life develops, not as prisons from which the soul must take flight.

THE EMBODIMENT OF RECONCILING SPIRITUALITIES

In reflecting on how such a theology might be embodied, Williams examines the work of two early modern figures that he sees as theological allies in the battle with a dualistic Christianity: Martin Luther and John of the Cross. At first glance, the two might seem unlikely conversation partners. Luther was obviously a Protestant Reformer (although a former monastic) and John was a Catholic monk. Luther is usually understood as a cerebral or polemical theologian while John would have been more comfortable with the designation of a mystic. However, two significant principles bring these men together in Williams' examination of Christian spirituality.

The first of these principles is Luther's and John's shared disdain for false or empty spirituality. And the second, out of which the first necessarily flows, is their emphasis on the cross. Both men articulate the significance of the particular, physical, historical suffering of Jesus that is at the heart of Christian doctrine and thereby at the heart of Christian life. As Williams states,

John and Luther are, among the great writers of the Christian past, the most poignantly aware of the ways in which spirituality can be an escape from Christ. For both of them, as for so many others, the test of honesty is whether a man or woman has looked into the darkness in which Christianity has its roots, the darkness of God being killed by his creatures, of God himself breaking and reshaping all religious language by manifesting his activity in vulnerability, failure, and contradiction. (*Wound*, 177)

According to Williams' claims at the outset of his book, this willingness to acknowledge, confront, and even embrace those vulnerabilities that accompany human life, even those moments of suffering that are part of human existence is a necessary element of Christian belief and, consequently, of Christian spirituality. A spiritual quest that seeks to deny or escape darkness would in effect be a denial of the mystery of the incarnation, the significance of the crucifixion, and the glory of the bodily resurrection of Christ. It would then be a heresy.

Thus in the work of both John and Luther, Williams finds a rejection of the very human tendency toward flight--flight from suffering; flight from the physical; flight from the everyday; flight toward the transcendent or exceptional. Rather, he

finds in the work and in the lives of both an awareness of spirituality that is “The sense of God living constantly in the soul, of God’s goodness in all things...not at all in terms of revelations granted in ecstasy, but in terms of a general disposition or attitude of the soul, a regular daily mode of seeing things” (*Wound* 175).

Speaking from within an analysis of modern spirituality, Lash also wants to illuminate the potential for more positive forms of mysticism, which work toward wholeness within the course of everyday life rather than intensifying estrangement. In order to locate the possibility that one might embrace the divine without rejecting or ignoring the contexts in which one lives, Lash highlights the distinction between exclusive and inclusive mysticism. He characterizes the former as a view in which “the purity and authenticity of relationship with God increases in proportion as other objects are ignored and other relationships are allowed to wither away” (60). The exclusive mystic supposes that love of God and love for the world are mutually exclusive, and therefore opts for what he takes to be the love of God (165). This perspective on spirituality, “far from being merely a matter of method, has far-reaching implications for both theology and social policy” because of the way it relativizes the realities that surround human beings in the everyday (134).⁷

Inclusive mysticism, on the other hand, embraces a view in which God is not placed alongside his creatures, so that he is in competition with them for attention, but rather behind them, as the light which shines through a crystal and provides its luster. God is loved here not apart from other creatures but through them and in them (165). Lash finds examples of this kind of spirituality in the work of John Henry Newman, Baron Von Hugel and the Jewish philosopher

Martin Buber. Within the context of inclusive mysticism, spiritual identity is not sustained by opting out of society, but by continual submission to purifying the self in the way one engages in affairs of the world (165). According to Lash's interpretation of Buber, a God who is sought or celebrated elsewhere than in the affairs of our social, mundane lives is destructive of a common humanity (181), a God who divides people from one another rather than uniting them within various forms of community.

Therefore, within such a perspective, there is no room for a distinction "between first and second-class Christians, between an elite corps of geniuses...and the slaves of habit who live their religion simply at secondhand" (Lash 187). The lines between the exceptional and the unexceptional, or between the ordinary and the extraordinary, start to blur, and the inclusive mystic is compelled to seek God within the everyday. Within one's spiritual journey, one acknowledges human limitations without despairing of them or attempting to escape them. Such a spirituality, according to Lash, because it refuses to take flight from everyday life, is capable of encompassing all of life.

Another significant way of discussing this pattern of spirituality that might work its way into and shape every area of every human life, and not just the exceptionally religious parts of exceptionally religious lives, is by means of vocation. The term vocation is often understood as pertaining to a career choice or to the ways in which one's employment might count as service to some higher pursuit. However, in its broader sense, particularly in the context of religious thought, the notion of vocation simply refers to a calling. I will focus on vocation as a calling to a particular way of life that embodies both contemplation and

action by its way of being in the world rather than seeking to flee that world.

Admittedly, this understanding of vocation can present something of a paradox. Because human beings are all different, to assume that vocation looks the same for everyone would be to dishonor particularity; however, it is also true that vocation for all Christians will exhibit faithful adherence to a pattern of life that conforms in some measure to what the community of believers has taught and practiced for centuries. In a section of his *Dogmatics* appropriately titled “Freedom in Limitation,” Swiss theologian Karl Barth reflects on this paradox:

In its reality vocation is the whole of particularity, limitation, and restriction in which every man meets the divine call and command, which wholly claims him in the totality of his previous existence, and to which above all wholeness and therefore total differentiation and specification are intrinsically proper as God intends and addresses this man and not another. (3.2 599-600)

In this definition, Barth manages to balance the universal or common nature of this calling (the divine call and command) with the specific nature of a human being’s response to that call (God intends and addresses this man and not another), all within a context of human, creaturely limitation. And while Barth acknowledges that it is unwise or even impossible to construct a unified theory of vocation that would apply to every individual, he does hold that there is a general form, and common criteria, that might hold for every believer who seeks to live into the calling she has received (Barth 600).

Furthermore, according to Barth, vocation assumes a narrative form as each Christian seeks to live out his or her part in the story of salvation and

redemption in this world, not apart from it. Timothy Herbert articulates this aspect of the Barthian view:

Vocation is a narrative event whereby the Christian inhabits the divine story living within the divine purpose. Finally, humanity is historical and temporal and has a given time. Vocation is the living of particular life given with particular purpose in accord with the Word of God. (137)

That the appropriate response to vocation might be narrative in form is all the more significant for my purposes, as my reading of Berry and McCarthy would seek to discover the ways that vocation is embodied and demonstrated through the fictional characters and worlds that these storytellers create.

Williams addresses the concept of vocation in his discussion of another sixteenth-century mystic, his biographical work *Teresa of Avila*, in a way that preserves both the paradox of the concept and its narrative form. He states that for Teresa, who was inarguably a mystic and a cloistered one at that, what was important in her spiritual life was not the intensity or the quality of an isolated experience, but rather how that experience might fit into a larger pattern of a life directed toward Christ. Instead of distinguishing between levels of mystics (and therefore classes of Christians), Teresa, according to Williams, acknowledges “a common Christian vocation, lived out within the historical structures of the Catholic Church”. Within this common vocation, this calling shared by all believers, the “‘specialness’ of exceptional experience is relativized.” And finally, “the authority of mystical experience has to be displayed in the shape of the vocation of which it is a part” (*Teresa* 147).

In other words, according to Williams, Teresa was unwilling to evaluate spiritual experiences, either her own or others, apart from the way in which those experiences participated in and even conformed to the vocation to which the believer was called--a vocation which would invariably involve loving service to others, patient endurance within the restrictions and frustrations of community, and fidelity toward all forms of life with which the believer might be engaged. Thus, vocation, even for someone as seemingly idiosyncratic as Teresa, is not defined as a calling away from the world, but a calling toward certain ways of life in the world. And a believer's response to vocation should fit into a pattern of life that conforms to the Christian story told and lived out by those who have come before and by those who will come after, each believer.

Lash, likewise, employs the language of vocation, or calling, in his discussion of a more modern thinker, Martin Buber, and of Buber's emphasis on the call that God issues to every believer: The call to conversion is not a call to abandon the world of I-It, but to embrace and embody the hopeful possibility of something better even in the midst of this world (Lash 195). Mysticism for Buber, says Lash, is ultimately about the response to a call or vocation. However, in order to resist the temptation toward exclusive mysticism, a form of spirituality that would call the believer out of the world into a purely spiritual realm, Lash emphasizes that the believer must receive this call as a vocation to fashion and inhabit community within this world: "It is in the occurrence of community, in the redemptive transformation of irrelation, that the breathing of God's Spirit, the movement of God's self-gift is transcribed into the facts and possibilities of the world" (283).

One theologian from an earlier generation who explored the possibilities of vocation in relationship to the Christian life was the Anglo-Catholic cleric and thinker John Henry Newman. In the preface to his 1877 work "The Via Media of the Anglican Church," Newman appropriates an early Christian framework in order to discuss the roles that the Church as an institution might be expected to fulfill in the world. The threefold office of Christ, first developed by Eusebius and later borrowed by John Calvin, has long been a way of understanding Christ's roles as a divine-human mediator: in the work of atonement, he is Priest, Prophet, and King. Newman takes this Christological triad and applies it to his ecclesiological argument. Newman thus speaks a word about how the church, Christ's body on earth, imitates him by accomplishing similar (though not identical) tasks to those of Christ.

Newman's triad provides a helpful model for the development of my own theological framework of spiritual vocation. Its primary strength is the manner in which it addresses the whole of life. Not content to isolate one corner of human existence and call it "religious," Newman argues that the Church can and should influence not only "worship," "devotion," or "sacred ministry," but also education and the way society orders itself. Thus, the Priestly function of the Church is charged with care of the soul, the Prophetic function with the education of the mind, and the Kingly or royal function with government of the common life (xl).

Second, Newman allows that there is necessarily division among the offices, so that the priestly work is carried out by the local pastor, the prophetic work by the university instructor, and the royal work by the curia or papacy. However, it is a strength of his argument that he acknowledges the difficulty of

isolating these functions completely from one another. Not only do each of these vocations benefit and strengthen the others; they are also able to hold each other accountable, so that the body as a whole might function properly (xli).

Finally, it is a strength of Newman's discussion that he recognizes the temptations and dangers bound up with each of the three vocations. He speaks to the possibility that priestly emotion might turn to superstition, that prophetic reason might run to rationalism, and that royal power might give way to ambition and tyranny (xlvi). It is necessary that each member of the body, fulfilling each of these roles, not overstep his bounds, lest his response to a calling become just another attempt to transcend his humanity in the name of religion, thereby attempting to become, in Bonhoeffer's words, like God, *sicut deus*.

Despite the strengths of Newman's framework, and its usefulness for my own argument about spiritual theology and vocation in the characters and narratives of Berry and McCarthy, I have modified Newman's triad somewhat. As an Anglo-Catholic arguing on behalf of the Church as an institution, Newman was thoroughly invested in defending the papacy as well as other forms of ecclesial hierarchy. While I am not in principle opposed to these things, my argument does not hinge on the existence or validity of a universal *curia*. I am, however, more interested than Newman was in exploring creation as a context for spiritual development. In my own triad, therefore, I have replaced king with pilgrim. Also, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, my definition of prophet, while heavily dependent on the way that vocation employs language, will emphasize justice over reason. In several other ways, however, Newman's triad provides a foundation for my own. Like Newman, I will argue that these vocations allow the

“religious” to shape all aspects of human existence in everyday life. Like Newman, I will argue that these three vocations--Priest, Prophet, Pilgrim--while distinct, are closely related to one another. Finally, like Newman, I will explore some of the temptations and dangers with which each of these vocations must reckon. This will lead into my later discussion of how the characters that Berry and McCarthy create exemplify either types or distortions of each of these three vocations, and how the fictional worlds these characters inhabit are shaped by their patterns of life.

CHAPTER 2

Before discussing the religious and cultural influences of Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy, and applying my triad to the characters in their fictional works, it is necessary to define the terms within the triad: the vocations of priest, prophet, and pilgrim. The ways in which I describe these roles may at first appear idiosyncratic, but I will explore some biblical, historical, and theological precedents for each of my definitions. What follows, then, is a theoretical framework, a construction of theological terms. Berry and McCarthy, in the fictions they create, put names and faces to these terms. They clothe them in flesh and allow them to act within their narratives, that they might help or destroy their fellow creatures, and that they might shape their communities and their worlds through their words and through their actions.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF THE PRIESTLY VOCATION

Perhaps as much as any category within Christian theory and practice, the vocation of the priest has been problematic throughout Christian history. Centuries of wrestling with the office of the priesthood culminated in the early modern church, where priests made an easy target for church reformers who sought to expose the excesses of Rome, focusing on the ways that religious doctrine and ecclesial position might be used to bolster the livelihoods of a corrupt few. Thus without completely abolishing the idea of an institutional priesthood, thinkers like Luther advocated belief in a universal priesthood,

commonly referred to as a “priesthood of all believers,” in which so-called “ordinary” members of the church ministered to one another as priests. More recently, criticism of the priesthood has centered on revelations about sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, at the hands of priests who would prey on their parishioners and an ecclesiastical administration who would either turn a blind eye to these practices or even enable them. In each of these examples, it is not the functions of the priest that are attacked, but rather the priestly tendency and temptation to exist above the people, to transcend the limitations of creatureliness by inhabiting a position of privilege that might open the door to abuses of power. The image of the priest, if it is to be reclaimed as a vocation proper to Christian spirituality, even a role or function to which every faithful believer is called, must undergo something of a rehabilitation. Contemporary theological reflection on the priesthood can assist in this rehabilitation, and the works of Berry and McCarthy can demonstrate what it might look like to answer, or reject, the call to a priestly vocation in the everyday.

Throughout this work, and in my engagement with the fiction of Berry and McCarthy, I will define the priestly vocation within the spiritual life in the following way: The priest embodies the vocation to acknowledge and celebrate the good, even the holy, within the human limitation of corporeality, or fleshly existence. In addition to addressing the existential temptation, described earlier, to transcend creatureliness by despising the flesh, this is a characterization of the priestly that would be compatible both within Catholic and Protestant traditions. This view also encompasses high church and low church views of the priestly within a Christian community, both of which involve fleshly existence. In the priest’s

liturgical role, he or she helps to mediate the presence of God by means of the flesh and fleshly ritual: the sacrificial lambs that were the victims within the Old Testament's context of priesthood; the bread and wine that is transformed in some way into the body and blood of Christ. Similarly, In the priest's pastoral role, he or she celebrates significant moments in the fleshly existence of the community, not denigrating the flesh but recognizing the potential for holiness within moments of physical transition or struggle: the cleansing in baptismal waters; the joining of two people (who become 'one flesh') in marriage; the anointing with oil of a sick or dying body. In these cases, a priest's effectiveness as an embodiment of pastoral compassion, and as one who sanctifies the moments of ordinary life in fleshly terminology and actions--bringing the liturgical and the pastoral together--is directly tied to his or her ability to be present with those who are either rejoicing or suffering, to share fleshly life with a community of the faithful just as surely as he or she shares in that community's spiritual life.

Thus, unlike those who would embody or exacerbate estrangement through their ways of being 'spiritual,' the true priest can recognize and celebrate the holiness that might be present in the flesh and in our participation in fleshly activities. What is more, he or she can celebrate this potential for holiness without giving into obsession or predatory impulses regarding the flesh, described by Bonhoeffer as the desire to possess the other that not only infects sexuality, but also other aspects of the fleshly life (123). This is a difficult balance to strike, but one that the priest manages as a response to the grace of God.

Many readers will understandably struggle with any notion of the priesthood that locates the priestly vocation within the everyday. It is common to

think of the priest as a figure who exists apart from the rhythms and patterns of the ordinary. This view is certainly not invalid. In most religious traditions there exists a priestly class or an ordained ministry; functionally, this tends to be viewed as a necessity. However, the acknowledgment of the functional significance of a group of people set apart to do a certain kind of job within the community does not prohibit or even excuse so-called 'ordinary' believers from embodying the vocation of the priest outside the walls of a sanctuary, or outside of clearly defined religious institutions, within the context of everyday life.

Beyond simply describing what a priest does, in terms of his or her fleshly ministry, it is important to reflect on why the priestly life might assume this form, why the fleshly elements of life might be sanctified and consecrated within the context of the priestly vocation. Two recent works that engage the priesthood by means of contemporary dogmatic theology can assist in cultivating a deeper understanding of this reality. Dermot Power's *A Spiritual Theology of the Priesthood: The Mystery of Christ and the Mission of the Priest* addresses the current challenges facing the integrity of the priesthood from within a Roman Catholic context. Timothy Herbert's *Kenosis and Priesthood: Towards a Protestant Re-evaluation of the Ordained Ministry* discusses the ways that an understanding of the priestly vocation functions within a recognizably Protestant understanding of a "priesthood of all believers". While Power's and Herbert's perspectives on who is and who is not a priest inevitably differ from one another, some aspects of their visions do agree, and in reading both works, it becomes possible to construct a theology of the priestly vocation that might serve as a foundation for an exploration of spirituality in the everyday.

Throughout both of these works, two theological doctrines shape the discussion more than any other: Incarnation and Kenosis. Both are significant for an exploration of the priestly. The first term refers to the Christian conviction that in Jesus, God was literally embodied, enfleshed, thereby challenging the notion that flesh is inherently evil or incapable of communicating holiness. The verse of Christian scripture which most powerfully articulates this conviction is John 1:14, which states that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son who came from the father, full of grace and truth." As Raymond Brown states in his commentary on John, the flesh here stands for the whole man and even binds God inextricably to human history and activity (Brown 31). Christ, therefore did not just take on part of humanity but all of it. He did not enter into the human experience as a tourist, or merely as a critic, but as a full participant in fleshly existence. What is more, according to John's gospel, it was by means of this participation that people have seen the glory of God. To state that flesh, or fleshly existence, is a mistake or even merely an educational necessity would seem to deny or to diminish this significant principle at the heart of Christian thought. A proper understanding of priesthood, say both Power and Herbert, fully embraces the incarnation, both in its articulation of the priestly task and in its depiction of the priest's way of life. It is because of the incarnation that priests celebrate the Eucharist in such fleshly language; the incarnation also shapes the priestly commitment to embodied ministry, from a position with the people rather than above them.

The second term, kenosis, refers to the self-emptying nature of Christ's sacrifice, his literal giving of himself for those whom he considered his brothers

and sisters. Here, Christian doctrine turns to Philippians chapter 2, where the author quotes a Christological hymn stating that Jesus, who was

In very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death--
even death on a cross!

This nature of humility and sacrifice, a self-emptying for others, must be present within the priest. Such a priest resists the temptation, as common in the first century as it is today, for those in power to use that power to subjugate those who follow them, and to manipulate those who are made vulnerable by their trust in the priest. It opposes directly those who would prey on others, either spiritually or physically. Instead of seeking to possess or consume one's neighbor, the priestly follower of Christ imitates the kenotic movement toward sacrifice, toward bearing the physical and spiritual burdens of others, that Jesus' life and death clearly demonstrate.

That each of these ideas--incarnation and kenosis--is employed by both Power and Herbert is a testimony to the significance of these doctrines for an understanding of the priestly vocation. While Power adheres more closely to the traditional notion of the priest as one set apart from the community, he

acknowledges that within his own tradition of Catholicism, there is a profound need for transformation of the priesthood. According to Power, this transformation will only come about through careful attention to positive examples from Christian history and proper attention to the theological convictions that formed those examples:

The resolution to the present crisis facing the ministerial priesthood cannot remain solely at the level of spiritual or developmental issues, but must rediscover archetypes and original models of vocation and identity if the process of trial and dysfunction is to become a journey towards transformation and integrity. This requires a theological method that can bear both the imaginative and spiritual weight of such an enterprise. (6)

In his analysis of theological method, Power finds value in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who employs throughout his theology of Christian witness the doctrines of incarnation and kenosis and “provides a horizon for personal spiritual appropriation that leads to a more profound engagement with the world in the light always of that solidarity which Christian faith conceives to be at the heart of the gospel” (27). Power engages throughout in breaking down a number of the dualisms that we have already discussed--between contemplation and action, individual and community, faith and praxis--thus forging a way ahead toward an embodiment of doctrine in the person and vocation of the priest.

These dualisms could not be so forcefully addressed other than through a proclamation of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Because of its emphasis on the incarnation, Power’s understanding of the priestly vocation (via Balthasar)

cannot elicit a disembodied or purely 'spiritual' response, just as Christ's incarnate life was not purely spiritual but rather involved his participation in the whole of human existence. There can be no division between the spiritual and the fleshly, between the vocation of priesthood and the priest's daily life. "For those who are called and sent, their office is so rooted in the very heart of their following that ministry and life can no longer know of any division" (69). Rather, as the priest seeks to imitate Christ's kenotic self-giving, not grasping at the transcendence of his God-nature, but humbling himself completely as a flesh-and-blood human, the priest must effect this imitation within the limits of fleshly existence and situated creatureliness, giving one's whole self, in humility and compassion, to those whom one serves:

Priests are called to live out concretely and existentially the incarnate mystery of God's redemptive love....The spiritual journey of the priest becomes the way of kenosis and the way of humble presence. The charism of the priest is that through his presence with and to his people, he witnesses to the original presence of the Incarnate God who from all eternity wills Himself to be Emmanuel, God with us. The Incarnation in its redemptive aspect is at the center of the pastoral vocation of the priest. (113-114)

When the second person of the Trinity entered the world, he did so not as *Pantocrator* (Conqueror) but as the opposite, becoming the servant of all. Furthermore, this kenotic self-giving is not only realized in the Gethsemane and Golgotha experiences, but rather is at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation, shaping every aspect of the human life of Christ (32).

In the same way, while “the priest is called, in the breaking of bread, to bring his own being, his very self, into the sacred offering he is set apart to sacrifice,” (119) those who enter into the priestly vocation must also realize the call to give of themselves and to bear witness to Christ’s sacrifice, not only in the moment of consecration at the altar, but in every moment of the priestly life. This is a difficult burden to bear, but a necessary one:

He will certainly experience for himself in the darkness of faith the solidarity with those who find faith difficult or who have lost their way. As confessor he experiences in his own body, so to speak, the struggle with sin and the reaching out for God...Living this mystery often brings the priest into the hidden depths of the reality of sin and its burden too heavy to bear in the lives of the people. (126)

Even within a tradition that emphasizes the necessity of an ordained, set apart, priesthood, Power manages to articulate the possibility and the necessity of a priestly vocation that is integrated into everyday, communal life. and that in its self-giving, incarnate presence sanctifies that life. With Balthasar’s theological method as his foundation, Power concisely articulates the priestly vocation in a way that stresses the significance of the doctrines of incarnation and kenosis and at the same time roots the embodiment and imitation of these aspects of Jesus’ life in the midst of the ordinary:

The sense of living beside and sharing life with the people of God roots the servant priesthood in the most radical and concrete experience of incarnational and redemptive mission. The radical witness, therefore of the priest of the parish rests in Christ’s call to

root priestly presence in the very fabric of the commonplace,
everyday life of the people. (115)

While speaking from a Protestant perspective, Timothy Herbert also employs Balthasar's theology, specifically his attention to the doctrines of incarnation and kenosis, in articulating his own theology of priesthood. Herbert roots the construction of priestly identity in a reading of Philippians 2, the passage quoted above as an early Christian proclamation of Christ's kenotic self-giving (115). He states that the identity of every member of the Christian community, according to Paul, is kenotic and relational, and can only be properly understood as a participation in Jesus Christ, who initiated this mutual participation with humanity in his incarnation. This kenotic, incarnational participation, which Paul effects in his own ministry and to which he calls every Christian, is the priestly vocation (102).

Herbert also interrogates the Catholic emphasis on the mediatory function of the priest, as one who stands between the people and God. In Herbert's view, this emphasis, perhaps unintentionally, transforms the priest into a figure that transcends the community, and undermines Balthasar's own view of a pneumatic, embodied community of faith (117). In order to wrest the vocation of priesthood away from its institutional moorings and to free it for embrace by the whole of the community, Herbert brings into conversation with Balthasar the "Christological anthropology" of Jurgen Moltmann. In Moltmann's view, says Herbert, the Church is neither an institution nor a sacrament providing a representation of the history of Christ, but rather a community of men and women called to participate as *dramatis personae* in the divine narrative of God's work

(121). By appealing to Moltmann, Herbert preserves an emphasis on kenosis and incarnation as aspects of the priestly vocation, while still asserting that “there can really be no fundamental division between the general priesthood of all believers and the particular priestly ministry” (122). Thus Herbert, with the help of Moltmann, engages in a breaking down of the one dualism that Power left in place--the division between the individual priest and the priestly community.

According to Herbert, the entire community will exist, among one another and in the world, as those who imitate Christ’s kenosis through embodied, incarnational ministry to those who both celebrate and struggle with the limitations of fleshly existence. The goal of vocation “is not a special Christian existence but the existence of the Christian as such” (136). This does not mean that there will not be figures within this narrative who lead the community by example, who embody the vocation of priesthood more effectively than others, and who tell the story with their lives in a more dramatic way. But Herbert would resist the notion that these leaders inhabit this position by virtue of a special designation that sets them apart from the community.

Finally, in articulating his vision of the priesthood and its relation to both the community and to God, Herbert asserts that the community’s participation in this self-emptying ministry of kenotic sacrifice does not diminish those who participate, but, paradoxically, strengthens them. Just as Philippians 2 asserts that Christ’s self-sacrifice resulted in his glorification, so Herbert argues that priesthood in the midst of Christian community is an “externalization of kenosis not as a pernicious sacrifice but as resurrection.” In contrast to the exclusive mysticism that Lash’s spiritual theology resisted, Herbert presents a vision of

priestly spirituality in which “the divine-human diastasis has been overcome, God and man are at table sat down; both retain their identity but yet participate in the other” (268). The priest does not have to turn his back on the world in order to love God; he does not have to denigrate fleshly existence in order to embrace the spiritual. He certainly does not have to annihilate the fleshly self in order to attain some higher, purely mystical state. Rather, he celebrates the potential for holiness that exists within the rhythms of fleshly existence--both his own and the existence of those he serves--especially those rhythms and realities that present themselves shrouded in darkness and struggle, in the shadow and the form of the cross.

Thus, even while there have always been, and will likely always be, disagreements and controversies over the function, the authority, and the nature of the priesthood within Christianity, it appears that some measure of consensus is at least possible regarding the place of incarnation and kenosis in developing a definition of the priesthood for the purposes of spiritual theology. The priest, far from being merely an authority figure, and always aware of the temptations to power and manipulation that will be present in his vocation, is called to embody an incarnate compassion, giving himself in the flesh for the sake of those who struggle with fleshly matters, from sickness to sin. In so doing, in committing himself to be present--not just “spiritually” but also bodily--among the suffering, and to bear with them the burdens and the blessings of fleshly life, the priest is able not only to see moments of human, fleshly existence as holy, but also to make those moments holy, helping to sanctify them by his graceful and grace-filled presence.

THE PROPHETIC VOCATION: BEYOND FUTURISM

Among the vocations explored here, it would seem that those called to be prophets would be most susceptible to the danger of separating themselves from the rhythms and realities of everyday life. To be a prophet, in the minds of most casual observers, is to possess a special--perhaps even a magical--capability: prophets are those who can tell the future. An examination of the biblical prophets does not contradict this notion entirely. Most, if not all, of the prophetic books in the Jewish and Christian canons include extended passages of oracles, or visions, in which the prophet, whether he was a writing prophet or not, proclaims what is going to happen at some point in the future. Prophets do generally have a word to say concerning events that are about to unfold. However, to limit the understanding of prophets to include only men or women who tell the future is to limit also the understanding of the important role they played in the communities to which they prophesied, and the important role they can play in their communities, and in the world, today. Speaking about the future was only a part of what the prophets did, and casting visions about what the world might be in days to come is only a part of what prophets do today.

In my examination of the prophetic vocation and its distortions in the fiction of Berry and McCarthy, I define prophets in a somewhat broader sense, but a sense that I believe is faithful to a biblical, theological, and historical understanding of the prophetic. A prophet, within this context, is a man or woman who recognizes the potential for holiness that exists within a community, and also uses his or her prophetic gifts--gifts of vision, of charisma, and perhaps most significantly, of language--to call his or her community back to that holiness by

speaking on behalf of the least powerful and most overlooked members. In fulfilling this vocation, the prophet embodies the virtue of justice, and thus serves as an instrument of God's holy righteousness, that it might be revealed not just in some special realm of the community's existence, but in the politics, the economics, and the other social realities that make up the life that a group of people share.

Given this definition, it is evident that the tendency to focus primarily or exclusively on a prophet's ability to see into the future contributes doubly to the inadequate perspectives on spirituality that were discussed by Williams, Lash, and others. From Williams' point of view, one might argue that focusing only on the future as the object of prophecy allows a prophet's audience to ignore life in the here and now, particularly those aspects of life that are most difficult. If a prophet's job is only to paint a verbal picture of a far-off place to which people might one day go, or some far-off event for which they are all pining, it becomes all the more likely that they will fail to confront the suffering and struggle that define life for so many today. The cross becomes easy to ignore if people can look past it. This is something, according to Williams, that true Christian spirituality cannot allow.

From Lash's perspective, the impulse to limit definitions of the prophet's function only to the moment in which he or she articulates some divinely-wrought vision of the future would push one in the direction of the kind of religious elitism that Lash confronts in his work. Not many people, if any, within a given community have received visions from God about the future. The temptation for those who do would be to stand above the community, to speak a word against

the community from a position of privilege, as those who have transcended the limitations of communal life. But I would argue that the prophetic imagination, or the prophetic function, cannot exist within a realm of spirituality that only a few ever enter; rather, it can and must be alive within a community. Without it, a community will be lacking in those voices that might call them to justice and to righteousness in their dealings.

Two modern theologians--one Jewish and one Christian--who have taken up the questions of what makes a prophet, and of what tasks rightly constitute the prophetic vocation, are Abraham Joshua Heschel and Walter Brueggemann. Both men demonstrate, to some degree, a resistance toward any attempt to divorce prophecy from the life of the people. For both of these scholars, the biblical prophets were those who spoke to the specific concerns of a concrete community. In his landmark work *The Prophets*, Heschel confronts some of the difficulties contemporary readers might have in approaching the works of the biblical prophets, difficulties that are rooted in expectations of what sort of men and women they might be reading, and expectations of what the message of these men and women might be:

A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way

through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums...They make much ado about paltry things, lavishing excessive language upon trifling subjects...Why such immoderate excitement? Why such intense indignation? (3)

In other words, Heschel argues, the prophets are not the voices whom readers turn to when looking for some abstract concept. They do not offer some metaphysical concept that transcends the realities, or even the limitations, that define human life. Instead, what readers find in the prophets are concerns, passionately expressed, about the lives of those whom society--especially the powerful or the privileged within that society--so often overlooks or neglects. The situations of widows and orphans, the realities of the market place or the slums, are not, in the prophet's view, 'trivialities'. To the "purely spiritual" mind, they may be limitations, nuisances, or obstacles that litter one's individual ascent to enlightenment. To the prophet, however, these are the contexts in which God's justice, God's righteousness, and therefore God's character, might be encountered or rejected. They are, consequently, the contexts in which the spiritual life is possible. To fail to attend to these concrete realities, in the prophet's view, renders any attempt at spiritual growth ineffective and anemic. Heschel thus speaks to the impossibility, in the prophetic mind, of enjoying a religious or spiritual life without attending to the rhythms and the struggles of communal life:

Amos and the prophets who followed him not only stressed the primacy of morality over sacrifice, but even proclaimed that the worth of worship, far from being absolute, is contingent upon moral

living, and that when immorality prevails, worship is detestable...
Questioning man's right to worship through offerings and songs,
they maintained that the primary way of serving God is through
love, justice, and righteousness. (195)

This is a word of critique against any who would presume to reach out to God by ignoring or neglecting the needs of those around him or her. To inhabit this vocation is thus to reject the exclusive forms of mysticism that Lash rejects in his own reflections on spiritual theology.

Brueggemann, likewise, articulates the close unity between theology and society that defines the prophet's calling, reminding his readers that the prophet's vision is neither wholly transcendent nor wholly immanent: "Theological cause without social political reality is only of interest to a professional religionist, and social political reality without theological cause need not concern us here. But it is being driven by the one to the other that requires us to speak of and wonder about the call to the prophetic" (6). Far from being a vocation wholly oriented toward the future, Brueggemann argues, the task of prophecy is "to empower people to engage in history," to challenge the claims of a status quo that says might makes right, that seeks to uphold the agendas of the current regime against those who have been voiceless for too long (13).

The question of whether the prophet is a different sort of person than others--a religious genius, perhaps--is far less settled in the work of Heschel. In his writing, Heschel acknowledges that the prophet fulfills a special function, and in the fulfillment of that function enjoys a transcendent experience. However, even for Heschel, the prophet's individual experience is secondary to the way

that experience comes to bear on the community. A passage in which Heschel distinguishes between the prophet and the diviner illustrates the ambiguity:

The spiritual status of a diviner, not to be confused with a prophet, is higher than that of his fellow man; the diviner is regarded as more exalted than other members of his society. *However, the measure of such superiority is that of individuality.* In contrast, the prophet feels himself placed not only above other members of his own society; he is placed in a relationship transcending his own total community, and even the realm of other nations and kingdoms. *The measure of his superiority is that of universality.* This is why the essence of his eminence is not adequately described by the term charisma. *Not the fact of his having been affected, but the fact of his having received a power to affect others is supreme in his existence.* His sense of election and personal endowment is overshadowed by his sense of a history-shaping power. (21)⁸

Elsewhere, Heschel further distinguishes between “religious experience,” of the sort that Lash’s exclusive mystics might pursue, and the prophetic vocation:

Religious experience, in most cases, is a private affair in which a person becomes alive to what transpires between God and himself, not to what transpires between God and someone else...In contrast, prophetic inspiration is for the sake, for benefit, of a third party. It is not a private affair between prophet and God; its purpose is the illumination of the people rather than the illumination of the

prophet. (202)

And finally:

Prophecy is not a private affair of the experient. The prophet is not concerned with his personal salvation, and the background of his experiences is the life of the people. The aim is not personal illumination, but the illumination of a people; not spiritual self-enhancement, but a mission to lead the people to the service of God. The prophet is nothing without his people. (362)

This points to the fact that the prophet does not, even in his special function, stand beyond the struggles of the people, that he is not to be set apart as something wholly isolated from those to whom he speaks. Instead, he exists for the sake of those--is even one with those--to whom his prophetic proclamation is directed. Without the community, the prophet is not more spiritual, or more advanced in his relationship to God; rather, without the community, the prophet does not even exist as a prophet.

This is not to say, however, that the prophet does not often do or say things in ways that set her apart. Although the prophet is not super-human--not a wizard or a magician, not even necessarily a 'genius'--in her very function she still operates in ways that are different from the majority. This is significant to her vocation on behalf of the community; it is because of this difference that she might challenge the status quo. As part of her vocation, the prophet has a unique way of seeing the world--what Brueggemann calls the prophetic imagination. This is not "imagination" in the fanciful sense that it allows the seer to escape from reality; rather, it compels the seer to use his or her gifts to shape reality. As

Brueggemann states, "Prophetic imagination as it may be derived from Moses is concerned with matters political and social, but it is as intensely concerned with matters linguistic and epistemological" (21). It is this imagination that allows the prophet to envision new ways of being community, new ways of being a people, that move them past stagnant patterns of exile and estrangement, of oppression and self-deception. He or she also possesses the willingness and the courage to communicate that vision to others, in ways that will capture the attention of the people--in the process allowing for the shaping of new communities, and even of new worlds, with his or her words.

Even with his higher view of the personal qualities of the prophet, Heschel agrees that the prophet was not, for the most part, a figure who performed many miracles. Rather, his task is to "declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (19). As in Brueggemann's view, this task will involve both a unique perspective and a unique mode of communication. According to Heschel, if the prophet somehow stands apart from his or her fellow citizens, it is because the prophet "is a person struck by the glory and presence of God, overpowered by the hand of God. Yet his true greatness is his ability to hold God and man in a single thought." And later, he states that "The prophet does not judge the people by timeless norms, but from the point of view of God" (24). The prophet thus sees things with a different set of lenses, which necessarily shape his response to the world in which he lives, because the prophetic vision does not allow him to separate--in the manner of those estranging dualisms we have already assessed--God's concerns from worldly events. According to Heschel, the prophet "is incapable of isolating the world. There is an interaction between man

and God which to disregard is an act of insolence. Isolation is a fairy tale" (24). Perhaps paradoxically, this way of seeing the world--through God's eyes, from a seemingly transcendent perspective--does not compel or tempt him or her to neglect the particular, the mundane, the lowly actions and events and realities that constitute life yet which men and women so often overlook. Rather, it compels him to attend to those actions and events and those people that capture God's attention, and this, inevitably, draws the prophet's eye to the "least of these" within any community.

In addition to seeing things differently, the prophet also articulates things differently. On the manner of prophetic speaking and writing, Heschel remarks:

The prophet's use of emotional and imaginative language, concrete in diction, rhythmical in movement, artistic in form, marks his style as poetic. Yet it is not the sort of poetry that takes its origin, to use Wordsworth's phrase, 'from emotion recollected in tranquility.' Far from reflecting a state of inner harmony or poise, its style is charged with agitation, anguish, and a spirit of nonacceptance. The prophet's concern is not with nature but with history, and history is devoid of poise....The prophet is one not only with what he says; he is involved with his people in what his words foreshadow. That is the secret of the prophet's style: his life and soul are at stake in what he says and in what is going to happen to what he says...Prophetic utterance is rarely cryptic, suspended between God and man; it is urging, alarming, forcing onward...carrying a summons as well as an involvement. (6)

The prophet, according to Heschel, is one with his words; he is also one with the people to whom he speaks, as well as with the purposes of the God for whom he speaks. Neither the prophet's relationship to language, to community, or to God, are abstract or separated from his pattern of life, but are inextricably linked to who he is. The prophet understands the power of words to cast visions of a future that might unfold, and even to bring that future from potentiality to actuality by calling communities to repentance, by urging people within society to take his words as seriously as he does. It is in the relationship between proclamation, hearing, and repentance, that change is affected, and that the communities in which people live, the world that they inhabit, begin to break free from those estrangements that would otherwise enslave.

In summary, the prophetic vocation is not a calling to transcend one's community in order to reach God or to realize the good. It is not a call to overcome the limitations that others place on us or the obligations to others that are part of human existence. Instead, to be a prophet is to be a part of a community and even to exist for the sake of that community. The prophet uses his gifts--his unique perspective and capacity for language--on behalf of the community. Thus, he is able to see what is possible if the people around him were to embody justice in particular and concrete ways, or what is likely if they reject justice in ways that are equally particular and concrete. And he is able to employ language in such a way that his community might be awakened from its sleepy acquiescence to the powers that be. And he does all of this, not for his own sake, but for the sake of his community, particularly for those voiceless members of the community--the poor, the oppressed, the widow and orphan--

who lack the means to provide or to purchase advocacy for themselves. In fulfilling this function, in embodying the virtue of justice and in calling others to do the same, the prophet works to recover the potential for holiness that exists within the context of human community, and thus works to help that community assuage, rather than to exacerbate, that social estrangement that, in attempts to transcend humanity and thus become like God, leave people isolated from one another.

THE PILGRIM LIFE IN A DISORDERED CREATION

Thus far, I have defined priesthood as a vocation which takes seriously the potential for holiness within the (otherwise) limiting constraints of fleshly existence, viewing corporeality as a necessary context in which priestly work, and therefore spiritual growth, takes place. For the prophet, the community, that system of relationships and obligations to other people that might otherwise be viewed as confining or even frustrating, serves as the crucible in which the prophet realizes her vocation, and thus her humanity, more fully. The vocation of the pilgrim is a vocation of space. It is a call to a life that recognizes physical, concrete places as holy, and which journeys toward those places in a state of wonder. In contrast to the mode of spirituality that denigrates one's earthly surroundings as the work of an alien or malevolent force, and seeks to escape from those surroundings at all costs, the pilgrim understands that the world in which he lives can and must be a context in which people encounter sacredness--it is the only world they know. The pilgrim thus embodies and evinces a posture of watchful openness to the created order not as some abortion or degraded realm, but as an arena in which God is at work.

As Rowan Williams indicates in his essay "On Being Creatures," a proper theology of creation must lie at the heart of any contemplative endeavor (69). I would argue that a robust theology of creation is the most significant ingredient to an adequate understanding of the vocation of pilgrimage. Norman Wirzba, in his work *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, offers a theology of creation that is at the same time a theology of worship, a theology which proves valuable to reflection on the position of the pilgrim within the created order. When he asks, "Have we so ordered our lives and our economies that in our relationships with the whole creation we reflect God's original peace and delight?" (125) he poses a practical question, and an important one. At its heart, this is a question about humanity's uses of, and habitation of, the world. We are all situated somewhere within the created world. We all travel across some parcel of earth on a daily basis. The pilgrim is, for starters, one who does not travel mindlessly or carelessly, but rather reflects on the nature of her journey, and ponders the ways in which she uses and relates to her surroundings. Ultimately, the pilgrim is one who laments that the economies and ecologies that dominate contemporary culture have robbed this world of its sanctity by viewing it as little more than a storehouse of marketable resources. The pilgrim seeks to inhabit and to use the world, to traverse its landscapes, in ways that point to its creator, either explicitly or implicitly.

Among the most obvious challenges to the pilgrim's recognition of his or her place in creation are the stories, including those derived from certain interpretations of Christian Scripture, that speak a word about humanity's dominion over the earth. Wirzba cites Genesis 1:28 as the biblical text that "has

played the most determinative role in shaping our understanding of humanity's place in creation" (123). This is the verse that speaks, in some translations, of humanity's call to subdue the earth and to rule over it. According to Wirzba, the meaning of these terms, and the verse in which they are found, is not fully given in the Bible itself, but has developed over time, most often in response to the growth of market economies. Wirzba challenges readers to rethink and reorder our understanding of Genesis 1:28. He argues that the meaning of subjugation and dominion needs to be developed "as the people of God learn from God what is their proper place in creation"--a process involving a hermeneutics of embodied understanding (124). He suggests as a starting point for this learning process a reading of the verses immediately preceding Genesis 1:28, verses which indicate that human life is set apart from the rest of creation because it shares in the image of God. In language reflecting Bonhoeffer's own critique of humankind's efforts to be *sicut deus*, Wirzba says that the image of God is not a possession but a relationship, one that involves humility before our creator and also compassion for our fellow creatures (124).

Wirzba's reading of Genesis 1:28 thus corresponds to his reading of the Yahwist account of creation, the version of the creation narrative in which humanity's close relationship to the soil is emphasized. According to this account, humans are not only *Imago Dei*, but also *Imago Mundi*, image of the earth (124). To forget this double relationship is to forget who we are. Thus, quoting Vladimir Lossky, Wirzba gives an account of human spirituality that takes seriously the context of creation in which human creatures live and grow: "In his way to union with God, man in no way leaves creatures aside, but gathers

together in his love the whole cosmos disordered by sin, that it may at last be transfigured by grace” (Wirzba 124).

Ben Quash is another recent theologian who argues for a view of creation that challenges humanity to rethink its relationship to the rest of the created order. Quash engages the thought of Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae, in speaking of the world as a gift from God, to be valued not only for itself, but also for what it says about the giver (311). Because Christians exhibit an awareness of both gift and giver, Quash argues, they are able to reject various mythologies that distort humanity’s relationship to the created order: the Immanentist view that fails to see creatures as signs of God’s love (313); the Manichaeian view that posits an irreconcilable opposition between the human spirit and the natural world in which that spirit does not ultimately belong, but is trapped (314); and the Promethean view that looks to human ingenuity and technology to manipulate nature and thus solve the world’s problems (315).

In language even more liturgically charged than that of Wirzba, Quash speaks of “the bread and the wine [of eucharist], along with “the sky, the rain, the sun and the moon, stars, winds, fire and frosts, night and day, green things upon the earth, seas, whales, birds, beasts, cattle, and finally human beings, all summoned to do the same thing: ‘praise him and magnify him forever” (312). Thus, in contrast to the manner of the *sicut deus* of Bonhoeffer’s reading of creation and fall, humankind, according to Quash, is a part of a much larger cosmic economy directed toward revealing the glory of God. If humanity occupies a special place within this economy--as the biblical witness claims that it does--it does so in order to help creation realize its potential for worship. This is a view of

life within the cosmos that goes beyond the stewardship model of the manager overseeing a cache of natural resources, but rather a life that makes room for creation to function as an icon, pointing to its creator. This, I would argue, is the vocation of the pilgrim.

Admittedly, there are some perspectives that will challenge the notion of a pilgrim as one who hallows all of creation by means of his relationship to the world. The most common way of understanding the pilgrim existence is one in which the extraordinary is emphasized, to the exclusion of the patterns and contexts of everyday life. Furthermore, the life of the pilgrim is one of movement, and the most common way of understanding that movement, especially within the Christian tradition, is to see it as a movement away from ordinary or mundane places and toward extraordinary or spiritual places. The temptation for the pilgrim, within this model, will be the temptation to flight, to envision one's life as always being an attempt to leave this world, with its very particular places, behind, so that one might reach the destination of a heavenly Jerusalem, whatever that might look like.

Among the most pressing difficulties in developing an understanding of the vocation of pilgrimage within Christian spirituality is navigating the ambiguous relationship that Christianity has to the notion of sacred space. The roots of pilgrimage in the Christian tradition can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is here that a theology of place is developed, not in an abstract way, but in the concrete patterns of life into which a people enters. As both Jewish and Christian theologians have argued, land is one of the central realities in the Hebrew Bible.⁹ The narrative of the Hebrews, from the origins of the covenant, through the

exodus and finally into exile, is one in which a yearning for a land is fundamental to their existence. The point of reference for this yearning is the land known as Israel, the parcel of earth in Palestine that the Hebrews believed God had promised to their forefather Abraham, and into which they had moved following the exodus and their time in the desert. After the institution of the temple in Jerusalem, the focus of pilgrimage becomes more narrow, as that city becomes the favored destination of Hebrew pilgrims, celebrated not only in the periodic communal journeys to the temple mount, but also in the “songs of ascent” that the pilgrims would sing as they traveled (McConville 17).

According to Old Testament theologian Gordon McConville, however, this emphasis on Jerusalem and on the temple as spaces of worship narrowly conceived was tempered by another perspective. In Old Testament thought, argues McConville, God does not so much dwell permanently in one particular space, even a space as special as the temple, but rather chooses periodically to meet humanity there (21). Furthermore, in McConville's reading of a Deuteronomistic theology of pilgrimage, the realm of holiness is not confined to a specially designated location; rather, the land itself, both inside and outside the temple courts, could and did serve as a meeting place between God and God's people. What is more, McConville argues, the conception of pilgrimage found in Deuteronomy presents not just a call to make a journey, but a call to live in relationship to the land, and in relationship to others who inhabit the land, in a manner that reveres their particularity and at the same time seeks to achieve unity (23). Pilgrimage, then, was not merely an event, but a pattern of life, a way of being in the land. It could even be read as a manner of inhabiting creation

faithfully, of “giving back to God as he has given to them, and in all this, rejoicing” (23).

Within the New Testament, the vocation of pilgrimage is challenged from another direction. Instead of emphasizing one place--perhaps the temple--as holy, to the exclusion of all others, New Testament thought runs the risk of eliminating any notion of sacred space altogether. As Kenneth Cragg states, “The Church needed no sacred land, people, or language: ‘its great locative was “in Christ” (1). As a missionary church, which sought to cross the boundaries of the ‘land of promise’ in order to carry the gospel to all nations, the earliest communities of Christians did not emphasize in their witness the particularity of Jerusalem or the temple, or even of the sites where Jesus died and was buried, where he taught and performed miracles. Giving support to the relativization of holy places were verses and narratives such as those found in John chapter 4, in which Jesus tells a Samaritan woman that a day is coming when true worshipers will worship not at the temple, nor on the holy mountain, but rather ‘in spirit and in truth’.

Cragg argues, however, that there is a place within Christianity for the pilgrim, and that the lack of emphasis on an earthly Jerusalem, or even on “Israel” in Christian thought does not reject pilgrimage, but rather enlarges it, providing an opportunity toward an inclusive theology of pilgrimage. He remarks that the early Christian movement outward to the nations was rooted in a decision (made by Jews, not Gentiles) that “Messiah” according to Christ had an inclusive quality (6), and with this quality came the capacity to make other spaces sacred--spaces beyond Jerusalem, wherever the community made its home and

lived faithfully in relationship to both place and people. In this model of sacred space, "Exceptionality will arise from history and tenancy, not from locale itself, if it is to arise at all". Indeed, Cragg argues, with reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem "Sussex," that the human tendency to designate only chosen spots as holy limits the goodness of creation (4). It is therefore incumbent upon the pilgrim to sing, "Where'er we seek Thee, Thou art found/And every place is hallowed ground." This line from Kipling is remarkably close to Wendell Berry's own "There are no unsacred places/only sacred places and desecrated places" ("How to be a Poet"). Both could serve as watchwords for an expanded notion of the vocation of pilgrimage.

Another tendency within Christian thought that threatens to undermine the notion of the pilgrim's vocation is that of interiorizing or spiritualizing the journey. From the book of Hebrews onward, Christian pilgrimage is most often envisioned as a trip to heaven, an eschatological reality, rather than one that has any bearing on our present surroundings. McConnville argues, however, with recourse to the theology of Oliver O'Donovan, that if the New Testament authors such as the writer of Hebrews saw fit to treat the promises made to the patriarchs, promises about specific land, as "shadows of the eschatological reality," this must have been because these promises were intrinsically powerful and thus worthy of attention. If land is treated as a metaphor for heaven, this does not mean that it is only metaphor; it does mean that it occupied a place of such worth in the Hebrew imagination that it was deemed a fitting metaphor for the ultimate destination (McConnville 26). Therefore, this allegorizing tendency within Christian spirituality could be interpreted as bolstering the significance of

land within the biblical witness, rather than subverting it. Any account of pilgrimage, even allegorical pilgrimage, that focuses on the “heavenly Jerusalem” to the exclusion of the world in which the pilgrim lives and moves also fails to take into account the importance of the journey itself.

Anyone who has ever undertaken pilgrimage, whether it be the Hebrews traveling to the temple mount, Medieval Christians on their way to Santiago de Compostela, or modern-day road trippers making their way to a favorite battleground or significant historical “mecca” knows that there is much to be learned, and much to be gained, by paying attention to the sights and sounds along the way. The pilgrim is one who understands that the life he lives is a journey. What is more, it is a journey that necessarily unfolds within the realm of creation. To look upon one’s surroundings with carelessness or contempt is to presume that some transcendent shortcut to a destination might be found. The pilgrim knows that shortcuts, either to Jerusalem or to an enlightened state, are rarely what they seem. He does not seek the way of flight, or escape, or the easy path, but rather attends to his surroundings with wonder and care.

CONCLUSION

Each of these vocations--the priest, the prophet, and the pilgrim--exemplify in different ways what it means to live a “spiritual” life without abandoning one’s humanity or seeking to transcend the limitations that necessarily define our human existence. Among the strengths of Berry’s and McCarthy’s narratives is the way in which the stories they tell and the characters they create exhibit qualities of each of these vocations. Neither Berry nor McCarthy work in a vacuum; their fictional creations connect with a vast range of

influences, including religious ones. In the following chapter, I will explore some of these religious and cultural influences that have shaped these two writers, before turning in my final chapters to the application of the priest/prophet/pilgrim triad to the characters and communities that populate Berry's and McCarthy's works.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter addresses the question that a study like this one inevitably presents: Why these two authors? What are some of the similarities and contrasts among their works that make a comparative study valid? In order to provide a preliminary frame for my theological study of these writers and their works, I will explore the following:

1. The life stories, travels, and career arcs of Berry and McCarthy, respectively;
2. The religious influences present in Berry's work;
3. The manner in which Berry treats the categories of flesh, community, and creation in his essays, poems, and fictional works;
4. The religious influences present in McCarthy's work;
5. The manner in which McCarthy develops the categories of flesh, community, and creation in his novels.

BERRY AND MCCARTHY: ORIGINS

The place of biographical material in reflection on a writer's work is, of course, always somewhat controversial. In a study such as this one, however, some engagement with the life narratives of these two authors is informative and necessary. Some account of origins is necessary, I believe, to a proper understanding of the cultural and religious influences present in their work. Such an account is not without its difficulties, however. In the case of Wendell Berry,

the connection between his life and work is a strong one. According to Janet Goodrich, this connection may be the most significant quality of his work--not just his non-fiction essays, but his poetry and fiction as well. She argues that among the many designations that one might ascribe to Berry, that of autobiographer is not just possible; it is actually the first possibility that she explores. In her words, Berry "writes out the categories of being that together make a self, defending and conserving the personae of poet, prophet, farmer, and neighbor imagined within the autobiographer by speaking their voices in text" (7).

Berry may less readily describe himself as an autobiographer, primarily because he is uneasy about the tendency of some writers to view their lives--and more significantly, the communities and places in which those lives take place--as "subject matter" for their art ("Imagination in Place" 1). According to Berry, one is not to read a direct correlation between his experiences and those of his characters: "It is easy for one's family or neighbors to identify fictional characters with actual people. A lot of writers must know that these identifications are sometimes astonishingly wrong, and are always at least a little wrong." But this does not mean, in Berry's estimation, that there is not a sometimes intimate connection between the context in which he became a writer and the content of the work that has resulted, however ambiguous that connection might be: "The writing has sometimes grown out of a long effort to come to terms with an actual experience. But one must not be misled by claims of realism" (1).

The experiences with which Berry has attempted to come to terms in his writing are well-known, because he has made them well-known. From his earliest collection of essays, *The Long-legged House*, through the numerous books of

non-fiction, articles, interviews, and public speaking engagements that have filled the decades since, Berry has not hesitated to share the story of his life with audiences around the world. This work of sharing does not seem to be an undertaking in the service of celebrity, in the way that so many famous people seek to gain notoriety by exposing the personal (and often sordid) details of their lives. Berry is a public figure; he is not necessarily a celebrity. Rather, Berry seems to believe that the lessons he has learned, and the journeys and homecomings he has experienced, might benefit others, and might ultimately enlist fellow workers in the task of building healthier communities. There is, thus, no shortage of material concerning Berry's influences and experiences, his values and convictions, available in a variety of media. The challenge, therefore, comes from the wealth of stories about how Wendell Berry became Wendell Berry, and the fact that--like the man himself--these stories are always developing, so that as he learns, his readers must also continue to learn.

The difficulty concerning McCarthy is a different one. Even as his celebrity has grown exponentially in recent years, he remains what he has always been--a famously private figure. He has granted to journalists only a handful of interviews in the decades since he began writing, and while he is not particularly combative or difficult on the occasions when he does talk about himself and his work, neither is he overly effusive. Like many writers, he prefers to let the work speak for itself. As he said in his first live television interview, an appearance on Oprah Winfrey's book club, "I'll work my side of the street; you work yours" (*Oprah* June 5th, 2007). Of course, when the work in question is as dense and obscure, as unwilling to give much quarter to the casual reader, as McCarthy's novels are--

particularly the early novels--letting the work speak for itself is no easy matter. The temptation, to which Dana Phillips alludes, is to see McCarthy's characters as ventriloquist's dummies perched on the novelist's knee, so that the work of criticism involves "strain[ing] our eyes to see whether McCarthy's lips move" when they speak" (28). Avoiding this temptation (while still giving ample attention to McCarthy's influences) will mean seeking to understand the facts of his life--scarce as they may be--while acknowledging the limits that McCarthy's reticence necessarily places on our understanding.

While navigating the life stories of these two authors is not without obstacles, there are reasons for attempting to do so. Their respective biographies provide some basis for comparison. First, there is their shared upbringing in Appalachia in the middle of the twentieth century. Wendell Berry was born in Henry County, Kentucky in the summer of 1934. His family had deep roots in the area dating back to the time when Berry's ancestor, James Matthews, had left Ireland in the 18th century to establish a settlement in Kentucky. Wendell's father John Berry, Sr. was an attorney and co-founder of the Kentucky Burley Tobacco Growers Association. His mother Virginia also came from a Henry County farm family.

Berry, therefore, grew up surrounded by farmers and farm people, and from a very early age desired to join their ranks. But Berry's early experiences in this way of life, and the stories handed down to him by his parents and other older members of the community, were not the idylls or utopian narratives that one might expect. Shortly before Wendell was born, as the Depression began to take its toll on the region, John was forced to help pay off his own father's

\$10,000 debt, using money from his law practice to help save the family farm. Decades earlier, in John's childhood, the area had been subject to violence as the "night riders," a group of local tobacco farmers outraged at the American Tobacco Company's manipulation of prices, set fire to barns and warehouses, so that the governor eventually called in a militia to help resolve the situation (Angyal 3).

Equally problematic was the cloud of racism that hung over and permeated Berry's early life. In his essays and other writings, the author does not ignore the problem of race relations as it existed in the Kentucky of his childhood; neither does he focus on it as the primary issue that occupied his mind in his early years, something of which he was precociously self-conscious from the time he could discern right from wrong. Rather, in works like *The Hidden Wound*, he treats racism as a form of estrangement--like so many forms of estrangement--that came to him with the air he breathed and the water he drank. It is a rift, a cleavage, that affects the perpetrators as well as the victims. It is something that he could not escape, a wound for which he could not hope to find healing, save by confronting it. So he does confront it, in an extended essay, always characteristically aware of his limitations in doing so:

This wound is in me, as complex and deep in my flesh as blood and nerves. I have borne it all my life, with varying degrees of consciousness, but always carefully, always with the most delicate consideration for the pain I would feel if I were somehow forced to acknowledge it. But now I am increasingly aware of the opposite compulsion. I want to know, as fully and exactly as I can, what the

wound is and how much I am suffering from it. And I want to be cured; I want to be free of the wound myself, and I do not want to pass it on to my children. Perhaps this is wishful thinking; perhaps such a thing is not to be done by one man, or in one generation. Surely a man would have to be almost dangerously proud to think himself capable of it. And so maybe I am really saying only that I feel an obligation to make the attempt, and that I know if I fail to make at least the attempt I forfeit any right to hope that the world will become better than it is now. (4)

One of the most significant characteristics of Berry's thought on race is that, while he has certainly been an advocate for civil rights, he does not treat race relations as a cause in the abstract. Like so many of the estrangements that he combats, this one is something that has affected the people and the place that he cares about deeply. Thus, in one section of *The Hidden Wound* he engages in a personal reflection about two people--African-American laborers whom he called "Nick and Aunt Georgie"--who were very important to him in his childhood. In one revelatory memory, from Berry's ninth or tenth year, Nick, whom Wendell has invited to his birthday party, takes his place on the party's periphery, sitting on the cellar wall because that, presumably, was his place. In a gesture that was neither self-consciously "political" nor wholly naive, a gesture born out of friendship, honesty, and loyalty, the young Wendell leaves his own birthday party to join Nick:

It was obviously the only decent thing I could have done; if I had thought of it in moral terms I would have had to see it as my duty.

But I didn't. I didn't think of it in moral terms at all. I did simply what I *preferred* to do. If Nick had no place at my party, then I would have no place there either; my place would be where he was. The cellar wall became the place of a definitive enactment of our friendship, in which by the grace of a child's honesty and a man's simple hearted generosity, we transcended our appointed roles. I like the thought of the two of us sitting out there in the sunny afternoon, eating ice cream and cake, with all my family and my presents in there in the house without me. I was full of a sense of loyalty and love that clarified me to myself as nothing ever had before. It was a time I would like to live again. (53)

In childhood, Wendell Berry encountered a series of estrangements: the rift between social classes, as revealed in his father's tales about the "night riders"; the rift between the races, as revealed in Wendell's own relationship with Nick and Aunt Georgie, a relationship that in so many ways and at so many points transgressed the conventional "way things were meant to be". These encounters shaped Berry not only as a writer and as a farmer but also as a member of a farm community. Thus, when he stated, in a 1978 interview, that "One of the strongest impressions I have is the impression of living in a place that has been damaged"(Angyal 2), he is articulating his awareness of the estrangements that have served as the impetus for his work and his life. Much of the work he has done over the last fifty years--whether as a creator of fictional worlds, a poet of the natural world, or an outspoken advocate for the voiceless small farmers, small-town citizens, and country folk whose lives and land have

been irreparably harmed by agribusiness ventures and strip-mining operations-- has grown out of these earliest experiences as a young resident of the Appalachian South. Although this region has been with Berry since the beginning, he has attempted neither to idealize nor to caricature it throughout his career.

Without essays like "Nick and Aunt Georgie" or "Imagination in Place" to serve as autobiographical markers of the author's early years, the reader in search of information about Cormac McCarthy's childhood has remarkably little to go on. What readers do know, however, is helpful for understanding the life and work of McCarthy on their own and also in relationship to Berry's story and his writing. McCarthy was born Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr. in July of 1933, a little more than a year before Berry's date of birth. Like Berry, McCarthy came from Irish ancestry (he changed his name to Cormac after the Gaelic king of Blarney Castle--the name means "son of Charles"). Also, like Berry, McCarthy grew up in the Appalachian South, albeit as a transplant. McCarthy moved south with his family to Knoxville, Tennessee at the age of four, in 1937. McCarthy, like Berry, was also the son of a lawyer; his father worked in Knoxville on behalf of the Tennessee Valley Authority (Lincoln 5).

Throughout his career, McCarthy has--not surprisingly, given his characteristic reticence--revealed very little about the early years of his life. According to Richard Woodward, a journalist fortunate enough to be granted McCarthy's first interview, in 1992 (as well as his second interview, thirteen years later):

For many years the sum of hard-core information about his early

life could be found in an author's note to his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965. It stated that he was born in Rhode Island in 1933; grew up outside of Knoxville; attended parochial schools; entered the University of Tennessee, which he dropped out of; joined the Air Force in 1953 for four years; returned to the university, which he dropped out of again, and began to write novels in 1959. Add the publication dates of his books and awards, the marriages and divorces, a son born in 1962 and the move to the Southwest in 1974, and the relevant facts of his biography are complete. (Woodward 1992 4)

Thus, as recently as two decades ago, what readers knew of McCarthy's life came from a thirty-year-old paragraph gleaned from the cover pages of his first novel. Since then, of course, more information has been obtained, mostly by Woodward, but the available material is still scant. Woodward goes on, in his *New York Times Magazine* article, to relate that McCarthy's upbringing was comfortable, a far cry from "the wretched lives of his characters" (28). His Knoxville years were spent in a large white house, on acreage and with woods nearby. His family was apparently well-off enough to employ a maid. Yet from an early age, the somewhat privileged existence his family enjoyed held little appeal for McCarthy. According to Woodward, his curious interest was drawn instead to the darker realities of life in the Appalachian region where he lived. The "one or two-room shacks" that dotted the landscape around his home, along with the strange and frightening occurrences that transpired in Knoxville's "nether-world," seem to have influenced his writings more profoundly than anything from his own

family life (28).¹⁰ These features of Appalachian existence shaped him as a writer of dark and sometimes disturbing fictions. As McCarthy offered in a 2007 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, “You grow up in the South, you’re going to see violence. And violence is pretty ugly” (Kushner 45). These words, perhaps as much as Berry’s more extended autobiographical reflections, serve to summarize concisely the connection between McCarthy’s Appalachian childhood and his fiction.

LATER TRAVELS

In addition to where their lives began, and the region where their earliest experiences shaped them, these authors are also both defined in similar ways by where they went from there. Early in adulthood, both Berry and McCarthy embarked on a series of journeys, and what they learned from their travels, including how they ultimately responded to these experiences, has come to bear on their subsequent writings, on their visions of the world, and on the characters and fictional worlds they create.

Berry’s travels away from Port Royal, Kentucky, from the people and the land of his childhood, seem to have been motivated primarily by his career aspirations. Berry desired from early on to become a “Kentucky” writer, but he also wanted to avoid the stereotypes that so often permeated “regional” writing, and thought that traveling might offer a perspective on the task of writing his place well. After attending the University of Kentucky as both an undergraduate and graduate student in English, Berry applied for and received a Wallace Stegner fellowship in Creative Writing at Stanford University. In 1958, at the age of twenty-four, Berry moved west with his wife and daughter to study under

Stegner, among a group of young writers that also included Ken Kesey and Larry McMurtry. The fellowship led to an appointment as a lecturer in Creative Writing at the university, and gave him opportunity to publish. Significantly, it also introduced him to the influence of Stegner, with whom he had little familiarity, but whom he grew to admire as a writer and as a man. In a 1995 essay entitled "The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity," Berry uses Stegner's analysis of cultural types as a means toward discussing his own commitment to place, to responsible vocation, and to a recognition of limitations as necessary for healthy human communities:

We certainly have had no better student of the workings of our frontier irresponsibility. Wallace Stegner was born into the failed and still-failing frontier dream of easy wealth and easy escape--the dream of the people he called "boomers"--that motivated both the westward movement of the frontier and the industrialization that followed. He recognized the powerful influence of this myth in his father, who "wanted to make a killing and end up on Easy Street" but who was driven, first by hope and then by failure, from one money-making scheme to another, and finally to ruin. This, in American boomers, was actually less a myth than a mental condition that Stegner described as "exaggerated, uninformed, unrealistic, greedy expectation." (67)

The typology of "Boomers and Stickers" that Berry saw in Stegner's writing is something that the younger writer has engaged at various points in his career, either explicitly or implicitly. It is obvious, even from the brief excerpt above, that

Berry appreciated the contribution that Stegner made to his life, as a precise and prophetic critic of culture; and that he also admired the way that Stegner learned from the circumstances of his own life. Both of these qualities are found in Berry's work as well.

Perhaps because of Stegner's influence, but just as likely because of the pull of the Port Royal region, Berry moved back to Kentucky in 1960 to farm his father's old home place. However, the Berries left again shortly thereafter, when Wendell decided to use the proceeds from a Guggenheim fellowship to travel in Europe, before taking a position as Associate Professor of English at New York University's University Heights Campus in the Bronx. Both of these experiences, much like the influences he encountered at Stanford, ultimately served--in different ways--to remind Berry of the importance of being rooted in a place, of being in relationship to the land of the place, and of entering into community with the people of the place. In a speech delivered in 2003 to a meeting in Pisa, Italy, Berry remarked on the significance of his time in Italy and its influence on his thought:

That I should have been asked to speak in Tuscany at a meeting concerned with food and hunger is appropriate, and it is very moving to me, because my conscious effort to think about agriculture and its problems began in Tuscany more than forty years ago. ("Tuscany" 175)

Berry goes on to relate that the months he and his wife and daughter had spent in Florence had been a context of re-evaluating the direction that his life was taking: "I had been raised a farmer and an agrarian. As a young writer, however,

I had learned to think of myself as a person destined to live far away from my native place and the farming life that I had grown up in (175).

This way of thinking began to change when Berry encountered the Tuscan ways of farming and the ways of farm life, some of which he had grown up observing in Kentucky, but was surprised to find them alive and well on foreign soil:

And so my first visit to Tuscany taught me something of the appearance, the practical means, the meaning, and the value of a way of farming developed in a long association between a local community and its land. I have not ceased to think of these things in the years since. (176)

But if the rural setting of his sojourn in Tuscany served to influence his eventual decision to move back to Kentucky by showing him what was possible, the urban context of his stint as a professor in New York City seems to have motivated him from the other direction. Two years living in the metropolitan area, first in New Rochelle and later in Manhattan, did not endear the Berries to city life, whatever attractions it held for a young man pursuing a writing career. As Berry recounts in an early essay, "A Native Hill," the decision to go home and to resume a life of writing, teaching, and farming in Kentucky was not an easy one, and was met with both resistance and skepticism from his supervisor:

I had lived away from Kentucky for several years--in California, in Europe, in New York City. And now I had decided to go back and take a teaching job at the University of Kentucky, giving up the position I then held on the New York University faculty. That day I had been summoned by one of my superiors at the university,

whose intention, I had already learned, was to persuade me to stay in New York “for my own good.”

The decision to leave had cost me considerable difficulty and doubt and hard thought--for hadn't I achieved what had become one of the almost traditional goals of American writers? I had reached the greatest city in the nation; I had a good job; I was meeting other writers and talking to them and learning from them; I had reason to hope that I might take a still larger part in the literary life of that place. On the other hand, I knew that I had not escaped Kentucky, and had never really wanted to...I still had a deep love for the place I had been born in, and liked the idea of going back to be part of it again...I knew that because I was a writer the literary world would always have an importance for me and would always attract my interest. But I never doubted that the world was more important to me than the literary world; and the world would always be most fully and clearly present to me in the place I was fated by birth to know better than any other. (173-175)

In terms dictated by careerism, there was little to recommend Berry's decision. Yet, as he seems to have understood at the time of writing the excerpted essay (first published in 1969, only six years after his departure from NYU), and as he has attempted to demonstrate in the bulk of his writings since, Berry's life and work have adhered to a different set of terms. He had no desire to write about the people and places of his childhood from afar; even more, he had no desire to write about anything else, from anywhere. So, after six years as a citizen of the

world, Berry returned to Kentucky permanently, not as a visitor who had “gotten out of” Henry County, but as one who had accepted the reality that, wherever he travelled, whether it be the West Coast, the East Coast, or the European countryside, he could not escape Kentucky, or neglect the demands that the region of his childhood placed upon him and upon his work.

While Berry’s travels in early adulthood were the natural result of writerly ambition and a measure of success in realizing that ambition, McCarthy’s journeys, no less influential on his career, seem to have been born of a more intense alienation, and a desire simply to leave his childhood behind. In the 1992 interview with Woodward, McCarthy alludes to a disconnect that occurred between his family and himself: “I felt early on I was not what they had in mind. I wasn’t going to be a respectable citizen” (28). Some of this estrangement from his family and from his childhood surroundings seems to have stemmed, according to McCarthy, from a deeply entrenched aversion first to school, and then to any kind of structured or steady work of any kind (Woodward 28). Despite this aversion, McCarthy, like Berry, enrolled in a large Appalachian university, the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he studied from 1951-52 as a liberal arts major. In 1952, he left school for the first time to join the Air Force. After four years of service in Alaska, McCarthy returned to Knoxville and to the university. He pursued a series of majors, including Engineering and Business Administration, and published two short stories, before dropping out again and moving to Chicago to work as a part-time auto mechanic and to write his first novel (Lincoln 5).

During his time in Chicago, McCarthy experienced two significant events.

He finished his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, and he married his first wife, Lee Holleman--a poet whom he had met at the University of Tennessee. McCarthy, it seems, was more amenable to the writer's life than to family life. He and Holleman had a son, Cullen, but divorced shortly thereafter. His manuscript of the novel was picked up by Random House, and McCarthy entered into a twenty-year relationship with the publishers, and with his editor, Albert Erskine, who had earlier edited the work of one of McCarthy's influences, William Faulkner.

Like Berry, McCarthy did not feel compelled to enter fully into the "literary world," refusing even in the initial stages of his career to do the work of publicizing his novels, much to the chagrin of Erskine and of Random House. But while Berry rejected that world in favor of a settled, stable (though, as he has repeatedly said, not a "simple") existence, McCarthy--following the dissolution of his marriage--quickly embraced the life of a nomad, repairing first to Asheville, North Carolina and then to New Orleans before using some award money to fund a trip to Europe in 1967 (Woodward 28). En route to Ireland, he met a British entertainer named Anne DeLisle. The couple married and lived in Ibiza for several months, during which McCarthy wrote his second novel, *Outer Dark*. Upon returning to Tennessee in 1968, McCarthy and his wife lived in a rented pig farmhouse with no running water, then purchased an old barn and spent the next eight years renovating it with materials salvaged from James Agee's boyhood home. McCarthy also used this time to gather materials for his brutally ironic third novel, *Child of God*, a tale of necrophilia loosely based on newspaper accounts of a serial killer in Sevier County, Tennessee.

Three years after the novel's publication, McCarthy and DeLisle

separated, later to divorce, and McCarthy made his last major move to date, heading west for El Paso, Texas. In typical McCarthy fashion, he purchased a small, austere stone house behind a shopping center. In that house, he completed two works that have since come to be regarded as McCarthy's masterpieces. The first, *Suttree*, was a novel that McCarthy had begun in the 1950's. It is McCarthy's most autobiographical work, a snapshot of his days spent among the outcasts and roughnecks of Knoxville that also serves as a farewell to that period of the author's life (Woodward 28). The second work, *Blood Meridian*, is widely heralded as McCarthy's finest work, a bloody homage to his favorite novel, *Moby Dick*, set against the unforgiving backdrop of the American West, the region that McCarthy has now called home for more than thirty years. The majority of his subsequent novels are set in the West--*The Road*, which has an undetermined, post-apocalyptic setting that bears some resemblances to Appalachia, is the only possible exception. To some extent, then, McCarthy's travels, like Berry's, seem to have come to an end. He married for a third time in 1998 and the next year his second son, John Francis, was born. More recently, he moved his family to New Mexico, where he lives today.

ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

The third shared element, in addition to their Appalachian upbringings and their subsequent travels, that binds these two authors together, is their common commitment to advocacy. Both involve themselves, albeit in distinct ways, to raising their voices against the ills that plague not only humanity but also all of the created order. Even for those who have read only a fragment of Berry's published work, this is perhaps the facet of his career that is most familiar. From

his earliest days as a writer, and especially after he returned to Henry County in 1964, he has been a prophetic voice, speaking and writing on behalf of those who are in need of an advocate.

Because of Berry's core commitments to the health of communities and ultimately to the survival of creation, it would perhaps be difficult, even impossible, to imagine him as anything other than a social advocate, a cultural critic, a modern-day prophet who deals in polemical arguments and hopeful invocations. What may surprise the reader of Berry, on first engaging his essays and criticism, is how difficult it can be to co-opt his work for the sake of any one particular "cause" or movement. Berry has repeatedly resisted the notion that his return to Kentucky was a retreat into the "simple life." On the contrary, he argues that his sojourn in urban settings, in which he was permitted to live as a passive consumer, was the simple phase of his life ("Imagination in Place" 2). By entering into the life of a particular place, by becoming involved in a local economy, and by investing himself in an intricate network of relationships that make up a place like Port Royal, Berry ensured that his life would become far more complex than it had been in New York City. It is out of an awareness of this complexity that Berry's activist impulse arises. It is in response to the wounds, the estrangements, that affect his particular place, and the people who inhabit it, that Berry's cultural critique takes shape.

Berry is consistently wary of embracing anything in the abstract, and his recurring emphasis on the need for humility that acknowledges human finitude and limitation leads him to be suspicious of large movements of any kind, even those whose claims and intentions find affinity with his own (Bonzo and Stevens

46). In an early essay, "Think Little," published in the 1972 collection *A Continuous Harmony*, Berry criticized what he saw to be a lack of perspective, and therefore a lack of integrity, in large scale movements toward political activism:

First there was Civil Rights, and then there was the War, and now it is the Environment. The first two of this sequence of causes have already risen to the top of the nation's consciousness and declined somewhat in a remarkably short time. I mention this in order to begin with what I believe to be a justifiable skepticism. For it seems to me that the Civil Rights Movement and the Peace Movement, as popular causes in the electronic age, have partaken far too much of the nature of fads. Not for all, certainly, but for too many they have been the fashionable politics of the moment...they have been powered too much by impatience and guilt of conscience and short-term enthusiasm, and too little by an authentic social vision and long-term conviction and deliberation. For most people these causes have remained almost entirely abstract; there has been too little personal involvement, and too much involvement in organizations that were insisting that *other* organizations should do what was right. (71-72)

Berry's skepticism should not be read as a critique of the aims of the Civil Rights Movement, or the anti-war movement, or the environmental movement, but rather a critique of the methodology of most large movements. Rather than moving from one cause to another, and substituting one state of urgency (or

emergency) for another, in the way that a dilettante pursues hobbies, Berry calls for a more engaged immersion in the life of a community, which by its very nature involves an immersion in the life of the world. When one embodies this perspective, one begins to understand more clearly the ways in which the problems that these individual causes seek to address are in some sense related. As Berry says, again in "Think Little":

I believe that the separation of these three problems is artificial. They have the same cause, and that is the mentality of greed and exploitation. The mentality that exploits and destroys the material environment is the same that abuses racial and economic minorities, that imposes on young men the tyranny of the military draft, that makes war against peasants and women and children with the indifference of technology. The mentality that destroys a watershed and then panics at the threat of flood is the same mentality that gives institutionalized insult to black people and then panics at the prospect of race riots...We would be fools to believe that we could solve any one of these problems without solving the others. (72-73)

Paying attention to a crisis or network of crises on the ground, up close and on a smaller scale, rather than embracing a tendency to abstract problems and turn them into causes, forces the advocate to confront his or her own culpability in a given situation and to enter into a process of self-transformation:

For the environmental crisis should make it dramatically clear, as perhaps it has not always been before, that there is no public crisis

that is not also private. To most advocates of civil rights, racism has seemed mostly the fault of someone else. For most advocates of peace, the war has been a remote reality, and the burden of the blame has seemed to rest mostly on the government. I am certain that these crises have been more private, and that we have each suffered more from them and been more responsible for them, than has been readily apparent, but the connections have been difficult to see. Racism and militarism have been institutionalized among us for too long for our personal involvement in those evils to be easily apparent to us. (73)

In biblical/prophetic terminology, what Berry is describing is the task of repentance, without which Berry would argue that large scale movements are futile at best and destructive at worst.¹¹

Berry's emphasis on small-scale, personal responsibility as a vehicle for real transformation and reconciliation is present throughout his career as an essayist, as well as in the personal decisions he has made toward cultivating a certain way of life. Thus, in one of his earliest essays, "Some Thoughts on Citizenship and Conscience in Honor of Donald Pratt," we read:

To make public protests against an evil, and yet live in dependence on and in support of the way of life that is the source of the evil, is an obvious contradiction and a dangerous one...If one deplores the destructiveness and wastefulness of the economy, then one is under an obligation to live as far out on the margin of the economy as one is able: to be economically independent of exploitive

industries, to learn to need less, to waste less, to make things last, to give up meaningless luxuries, to understand and resist the language of salesmen and public relations experts, to see through attractive packages, to refuse to purchase fashion or glamour or prestige. (87)

Readers familiar with Berry's life will recognize (and if they don't, Berry will tell them, later in the essay) that this is exactly the nature of the choices that Berry and his family and others in his community strive to make each day. And to the charge that this way of life is nothing more than a "quaint affectation," or a way of "dropping out," Berry responds, "At the very least, it is a way of dropping *in* to a concern for the health of the earth, which institutional and urban people have had at second hand at best, and mostly have not had at all ("Some Thoughts on Citizenship" 88).

Almost thirty years later, in a 1998 essay entitled "In Distrust of Movements," Berry expresses a similar perspective, revealing that his commitment to a certain kind of advocacy--one that demands concrete, personal involvement--has not wavered but, if anything, has grown stronger over time:

When I try to identify myself I realize that, in my most immediate reasons and affections, I am less than an American, less than a Kentuckian, less even than a Henry Countian, but am a man most involved with and concerned about my family, my neighbors, and the land that is daily under my feet. It is this involvement that defines my citizenship in the larger entities. And so I will remember, and I ask you to remember, that I am not trying to say what is

thinkable everywhere, but rather what is permissible to think on the westward bank of the lower Kentucky River in the summer of 1998.

(43)

Berry's approach to social and political advocacy is significant because of the way it is both inspired by his personal experiences and also conditioned by them. It is an approach that revolves around questions of citizenship: What does it mean to be a citizen--not just a resident, or a transient, but a citizen--of a place? Berry's is a humble kind of advocacy, one that acknowledges its limitations, and thus avoids totalizing or utopian impulses. At the same time, Berry's desire for change is no less passionate or urgent than that embodied in large-scale movements. On the contrary, Berry would argue that his approach to social, political, and ecological crises can be all the more effective because of its personal nature. Thus Berry is moved to speak or to write about racism, and to work towards racial reconciliation among his neighbors, because of the influence of Nick and Aunt Georgie. He addresses strip mining from the position of one who has seen the landscapes and the neighborhoods of his fellow Kentuckians ravaged by the careless and rapacious extraction of non-renewable resources from the earth. He is familiar with the particulars of these crises because he has lived among them, not just for a little while but for most of his life. This personal involvement and investment usually means that as an advocate Berry will not give in to the temptation merely to follow a social or political fad. It does not mean that developing or articulating a position will always come easy. As his essay "The Problem of Tobacco" demonstrates, sometimes being close to an issue and confronting its complexities on a daily basis makes it difficult to stake one's claim

to a “side” (53-54). For Berry, advocacy, like good farming, involves constant growth, constant flexibility, and a constant awareness that we are sometimes more ignorant than we would like to admit. It also involves a great deal of repentance.

Cormac McCarthy’s commitment to advocacy and his work of addressing social issues is considerably less well-known than Berry’s. McCarthy’s reputation as a recluse--even a hermit--would seem to exclude the kind of active engagement with the outside world that Berry manifests in his career as a public figure. In one of his few interviews, McCarthy has stated, for example, that he does not participate in electoral politics because “Poets shouldn’t vote” (Kushner 43). However, one piece of evidence signifying that McCarthy’s worldview may be different from the nihilistic inhumanism often attributed to his characters can be found in McCarthy’s involvement with the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico.

That the notoriously anti-institutional McCarthy would be associated with a think-tank, let alone that he would actually move to New Mexico in order to be closer to the community of thinkers, speaks volumes about his respect for the work that is done there. The SFI, as it is most often called, is a collective of researchers and fellows from around the world, many with Nobel prizes or other prestigious credentials, who gather to address the “big questions”. According to David Kushner, who explored McCarthy’s connection to the Institute for a 2007 *Rolling Stone* feature, McCarthy--the SFI’s writer-in-residence during that time--was the most respected thinker there (43).

McCarthy has always been a man of varied interests and voracious intellectual habits. In his 1992 interview with David Woodward, he revealed that

one of the things which had set him apart from grade-school classmates was the fact that they had no hobbies, while he had, by his own estimation, “forty or fifty”. In more recent years, McCarthy has claimed that he does not read fiction (aside from an elite few authors like Faulkner, Joyce, Dostoyevsky, and Melville), nor does he fraternize with member of the literati (Edward Abbey is among the few fellow writers with whom McCarthy seems to have had a personal relationship). McCarthy has long preferred the company--personally and intellectually--of scientists, engineers, and others who are concerned with the mechanics of how the world works (Kushner 44).

In some ways, McCarthy’s work with the SFI stands in marked contrast with the kind of work that Berry engages in and encourages others to engage in as well. The image Kushner conveys--a group of Nobel Laureates repairing to conference rooms to eat Mexican food and talk about the problems facing tribespeople in Africa--seems distinctly removed from Berry’s own narrative about eating birthday cake with Uncle Nick on the cellar wall. In most ways, it is. However, one element that Berry’s work of advocacy shares with McCarthy’s is its interdisciplinarity. Kushner writes:

Dressed in a crisp blue shirt and jeans, he sits comfortably with his weathered boots crossed and listens intently as a theoretical biologist who has flown in from Berlin discusses something called evolutionary economics - the relationship between animal behavior and marketlike forces. This is quintessential Santa Fe stuff, examining one phenomenon (biology) in the light and lexicon of another (economics). The discussion soon turns to the topic of

suicide. As a slide of a West African tribe flickers on the biologist's computer screen, the researchers dig into the idea that suicide attempts can be evaluated as a kind of expression of market forces --a threat to remove oneself as a source of benefits to others.

The neuroscientist in the corner raises her hand and poses a question to the group: "Does anyone know another animal besides humans who commit suicide?" Brains churn. Air conditioning whirs. For once, though, the scientists are stumped. Then the cowboy chimes in, as he often does, with the answer.

"Dolphins," he says softly. "Dolphins do." (Kushner 43)

This notion that economics and biology and psychology, and all the attendant problems addressed by each of these disciplines, might be connected in some significant ways seems to be in line with Berry's own approach to social issues. The idea is to work toward a healthier world by addressing complex problems in complex ways. There are no quick fixes. Those who gather at SFI do so with an understanding that any discussion about solutions to global warming or food shortages or any other crisis, will necessarily involve a great deal of listening to one another, and a great deal of humility about one's own specialized field of knowledge.

According to Kushner, McCarthy stands out among the SFI luminaries as the resident most adept at the task of listening to others, articulating their arguments with clarity, and synthesizing their insights in unexpected ways (Kushner 46). And as McCarthy readily admits, if his involvement with the scientific collective at the SFI has contributed to the work being done there, the

discussions that take place in those halls and lunchrooms have had a similar impact on his writing. He finds the kind of “soul” necessary to spark the imagination present at the SFI that he finds nowhere else. McCarthy’s apocalyptic novel *The Road*, in particular, was inspired by the vision of the world and the crises it faces that he encountered at the Institute (Kushner 44). Thus, if a final parallel can be drawn between Berry’s engagement with social issues and McCarthy’s, and the ways that these engagements come to bear on their writing, it is possible to see both writers creating fictions out of the communities they know. One lives among a community of farmers; the other a community of physicists, chemists, and neurobiologists. Neither would be who they are without these communities.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES IN BERRY’S AND MCCARTHY’S WORK

While the narratives of Berry’s and McCarthy’s origins, their travels, and their involvement in advocacy all influence their work, the religious perspectives behind their work are, in my opinion, the most significant. The question of why these two writers should be treated in an exploration of spiritual theology is a valid one. Neither of these two authors make explicit claims to be theologians. Readers of both have rightly exercised caution in labeling them as “Christian writers”.¹² I will follow suit. Yet, as numerous readers of these two authors have pointed out, the works of both wrestle profoundly with religious and spiritual questions, albeit in markedly different ways.

Sometimes, as in McCarthy’s earlier fiction, the wrestling matches between literature and religion are a bloody mess; these books take no survivors. Characters such as Rinthy Holme and *Blood Meridian*’s kid, characters who

stand for mercy and gentleness, are usually overwhelmed by the violence and brutality that surround them. The readers of such works as *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* may wonder where God is in this fictional world, or if such a God as one finds here is even worthy of belief, much less reverence or love. These fictions operate on a grand scale. If they are realistic in their depictions of inhumanity and the destruction that one man would be willing to visit upon another, these books are also somewhat mythical. They paint an ethereal, nightmarish tableau of good versus evil, in which the latter almost always consumes, chokes out, or obscures the former. At the same time, one of the most astute readers of McCarthy, Dianne Luce, has stated that spirituality is what most drives McCarthy's works: "For McCarthy it is the spiritual status of the characters, as opposed to their psychological experience, that is most at stake." At the same time, Luce points out, his characters almost always evince a troubled relationship toward authority, toward the restrictions of community life, which they usually perceive as threatening and hierarchical. Because of this, there is a certain "spiritual outlawry" present in McCarthy's works (Luce ix). Their mood is spiritual without being religious.

The works of Berry, on the other hand, more readily provide contexts in which grace is an evident possibility--although not always an obvious one. In contrast to the mood of McCarthy's fiction, Berry's narratives unfold in mundane and ultimately unassuming tones. Occasionally, characters like Andy Catlett or Hannah Coulter will partake in what might be called spiritual visions, but these visions are always and inextricably rooted in the earthly realities--family, community, farmland--that are at the center of the characters' lives. God is

certainly present in these works, but is never revealed other than in the this-worldly practices and commitments that map out the day-to-day existences of the Coulters and Catletts, the Feltners and Branches, and all of the other men and women who manifest faithfulness in the simple economics and politics of their small community.

Thus, the struggle between good and evil in Berry's world is equally mundane. There is not a hint of the mythical in the decisions that Berry's characters make, but that fact does not render those decisions any less important. Rather, they are decisions which will inevitably come to bear on both present and future in significant and irreversible ways. What Mat Feltner says of Jack Beechum could rightly be said of a number of Berry's characters: "He was not a churchly man. He was a man of unconfining righteousness" (*Memory of Old Jack* 151). Indeed, this could serve as a concise articulation of the vision of righteousness that has shaped Berry's life and work for decades. It is a vision--if the paradox can be forgiven--that is religious without being spiritual.

It is tempting to read the works of these two authors--one whose stories narrate the awful power of sin while the other tells of the transformative potential of human kindness--as too distinct to be reconcilable to one another. Certainly, fruitful conversation between the two might appear difficult if not impossible, particularly from within a religious context. I would argue, however, that, especially from a religious point of view, one that is open to the possibility that there might be various ways of articulating a common message, there is much to recommend a reading of these two authors and their characters in conversation with one another---a reading that highlights both their differences and their

similarities. In my reading of their fictional works, it seems that Berry and McCarthy, despite their distinct styles and thematic treatments, actually treasure the same--or similar--things. In the broadest terms, they both value a healthy world and a healthy humanity. They both value people who would reject the tendency to destroy each other and the world in which they live. I also believe that Berry and McCarthy lament similar things as well--ontological homelessness, along with the estrangements that mark the human condition.

One way of reading McCarthy, especially the early McCarthy, is to see the author as a sensationalist who traffics in human depravity for ignoble purposes. This seems to have been the reading that Walter Sullivan offered of McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, which he called, "clear evidence of the plane of madness to which our art has finally descended," an 'affront to decency on every level' (Guinn 109)." Others, like Vereen Bell and Dana Phillips, have focused on the nihilism and the "inhumanist" perspective in McCarthy's work as the key to understanding the author's vision of the world. I am more inclined to read McCarthy in the way that Edwin Arnold does, as a moralistic writer. I think that McCarthy's disturbing renderings of human nature at its worst have more in common with the work of his hero Fyodor Dostoyevsky than with the writings of the Marquis de Sade. In other words, McCarthy depicts the excesses of sin without celebrating them. As Dianne Luce states, "Repeatedly, McCarthy's works affirm the value of the search [for insight] that demands man's inner resources--his compassion, his courage, his honesty, his spirit--even while many of them depict the lost or the non-seeking" ("They Ain't the Thing" 36). If McCarthy's works depart from strict realism in the Dantean or Boschian imagery so indicative

of his style, it may be that in giving a voice to--even focusing to the point of exaggeration on--the darkness, McCarthy helps his readers to imagine the likely outcome of the estranged ways of life that have become so familiar as to almost be comfortable. For the Christian reader, the fact that so much of McCarthy's religious symbolism emerges out of gnostic forms of Christianity should serve notice that McCarthy finds much in that tradition--which seems to be the only reading of Christianity he has--that tends toward the destructive, the nihilistic, the inhumanist.

The term moralistic--as Arnold uses it, to characterize a fictional universe in which the decisions that characters make, good or bad, have definite consequences--could certainly be applied to Berry's fiction as well. In his own reflection on his work, Berry stops short of calling himself a moralist; he does, however, accept the designation of "advocate," which is likely to be equally unpopular in literary circles. He understands his calling as a storyteller, as a creator of fictions, as one that skews away from the standard of realism, strictly speaking, because it begins to ask not only "How things really are," but also "How things will be, how you want things to be, how things ought to be" ("Imagination in Place" 14). Berry understands the work of a writer--including his own work--as requiring that we "reach for a reality that is inaccessible merely to observation and perception, but which in addition requires imagination...and also inspiration, which you can only hope and pray for" ("Imagination in Place" 15). Most telling, Berry asserts that "Hovering over nearly everything I have written is the question of how a human economy might be conducted with reverence, and therefore with due respect and kindness toward everything involved ("Imagination

in Place" 15). This, it would seem, is Berry's vision for both his work and life; and as any reader of Berry would argue, the two cannot be divorced from one another. If Berry's work does not seek so-called realism as its highest priority--and Berry clearly states that it does not--if it focuses on those qualities in his characters that seem to be sorely lacking in McCarthy's protagonists, this does not make Berry's vision naive or utopian any more than McCarthy's is nihilistic.

Ultimately, then, I would argue that both of these men desire to live in a world where estrangement--from the fleshly self, from community, and from creation--do not define humanity. Ultimately, however, both are less than sanguine about the ways--including those ways that might be called religious or spiritual--in which human beings have historically dealt with our estrangements. Furthermore, I would argue that what makes the work of both of these men most valuable to the Christian reader with a concern for spiritual theology, is the ways that both are concerned in their writings with the question of limitations, and of how human beings embody either grace or destruction in their responses to the limits of human existence. And while both of these men utilize their fictions as contexts in which their similar desires and laments play out, they do so by appropriating radically distinct cultural myths and religious perspectives. They thus create very different worlds, and populate those worlds with very different characters. In what follows, I will examine some of the religious convictions and spiritual orientations out of which the works of these two men, however different or similar they might be, arise.

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES IN BERRY'S LIFE AND WORK

Joel Shuman, editor of the recently published collection *Wendell Berry and*

Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life, speaks to the difficulty of a Christian interpretation of Berry's work when he remarks that "it is unclear how many of the significant numbers of people who read Wendell Berry understand him as a Christian writer." However, as Shuman goes on to say, "That Berry is not frequently seen as a Christian writer, or that many self-identified Christian readers probably find him stranger than their own beliefs, says more about how attenuated Christianity has become in the popular imagination than about how well Berry's work synchronizes with the mainstream of contemporary North Atlantic culture, whether secular or Christian" (1-2).

Common impressions notwithstanding, Berry does not deny that he has been profoundly influenced by and that he writes within the context of a Christian faith. As he stated in a 2005 address to a group of seminarians, later published as "The Burden of the Gospels": It is a fact that I have spent my life for the most part willingly, under the influence of the Bible, particularly the gospels, and of the Christian tradition in literature and the other arts" (127). At the same time, even a perfunctory reading of Berry's writings on religious matters, and religion's relationship to the kind of life he advocates, finds that Berry's commitment to Christianity is by no means an easy one. Precisely because he considers Christianity to be his home tradition, he has sometimes reserved for Christian faith and practice a level of critique that he does not direct at Buddhism or any of the other faith traditions he admires and from which he draws. However, this does not mean that Berry's is not a voice or a vision amenable to a Christian worldview. On the contrary, it is because of what Berry criticizes and what he rejects, not in spite of these things, that his positive vision is so powerful, and that

it offers so much in the way of imaginative possibility for Christian readers who want to take spirituality seriously.

While Berry is often read--or accused--of embodying a sort of wistful nostalgia, in the area of his religious commitment he has quite clearly and decisively rejected what he believes to have been misguided or even toxic in the Christianity he encountered in his childhood. At the risk of oversimplifying that belief system by means of a label, it seems fair to classify the faith that Berry has rejected in adulthood as that which Phillip Lee calls Protestant Gnosticism.¹³ In his work, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Lee describes this attitude or posture within Christianity, one that (as noted by Rowan Williams, Cyril O'Regan, and others) has deep and pervasive historical roots, but which has propagated and taken on new forms within the fertile context of North American modernity. Thus, Lee agrees with Harold Bloom's assessment that gnosticism in a variety of expressions is in some sense "The American Religion." However, while Bloom celebrates the fact, Lee is intent on resisting it.

Lee takes as the starting point for his critical examination of North American Protestant gnosticism the same starting point that I adopted from Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Niebuhr: estrangement. More precisely, Lee calls it alienation, but he is certainly working with the same category as those earlier theologians. Gnosticism, like orthodox Christianity, rightly understands man's current status in the world as broken, fragmented, and estranged from its original intent. But whereas traditional, orthodox Christianity, even Protestant Christianity, was grateful for the cosmos and what was contained therein, as signs of God's grace, gnostic thought and much of later Protestantism began to look at the

cosmos as inherently wicked. According to the deterministic view held by this form of gnosticism, sin--with its subsequent estrangements--does not originate from humanity's free will, but is located outside the self (literally, outside the soul). Humans are subject to the evil forces of sin at work in the cosmos, rather than being willing agents of their estrangement. The consequence of the intrusion of this worldview into Protestant Christianity was a confused dualism not unlike what Irenaeus and other early theologians had combated in previous generations:

Whereas the ancient heresiarchs had read God's words of creation, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" as the mistaken and bungling act of the archons, the New England theology concluded that these words were, apart from redemption in Christ, totally ineffectual. The end result is the same: in both systems, humanity finds itself thrown into a chaotic world, at the outset alienated from God, from fellow humans, and certainly from the self. (87)

Among those who rejected this brand of New England theology, according to Lee, was one of Berry's heroes, Henry David Thoreau, who essentially threw off Christianity altogether in favor of an extreme devotion to nature: "The Great God Pan is not dead, as was rumored...Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine" (Quoted in Lee 92). Many New England Protestants, however, and countless adherents of some modes of evangelical Christianity that have followed, continued to view the created order with suspicion, if not outright contempt.

The prevailing mentality of Lee's Protestant Gnostics is one of escapism. Confronted with alienation and brokenness, which they believe is imposed on them from without rather than originating with their decisions and actions, the easier (and therefore more attractive) response is not to face their estrangement, not to pursue reconciliation, but to flee this world--the location of estrangement--in the hopes of finding something better. According to Lee, the methods by which many modern spiritual seekers attempt to escape are similar to those employed by their ancient forebears in early gnosticism. First, this involves the obtaining of a special gnosis, a knowledge that is personal, unmediated, private and ineffable, through which the believer can attain to a higher plane of reality, thereby transcending any limitations placed upon him or her by virtue of being a creature, especially a sinful creature. Lee argues that, perennial misreadings notwithstanding, Christian thinkers from Paul and Augustine, through to Luther and Calvin, resisted the notion that an individual, esoteric knowledge, a so-called special revelation of God's purposes, was necessary for salvation. Far more significant were the ways in which God worked in history and in the historical community of God's people. However, when New England Protestantism asserted itself against the perceived "popery" of the past, luminaries such as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards were compelled to privilege the individual sinner's conversion experience, resulting from a personal encounter with (to borrow Edwards' terminology) "A Divine and Supernatural Light" (Lee 102). Thus, American Protestantism, in a departure from traditional Calvinism, began to understand the human predicament as ignorance (a limitation) rather than sin (a result of a prideful desire to transcend creaturely limitations); the solution to this

predicament, then, was not humble repentance and forgiveness, but--in the mode of early gnosticism--illumination, a gift for the select few, or the elect. In this model, humanity is not culpable for the estrangements which mark our existence. The fault lies, in Lee's words, with "the worldliness of the world." Human beings, stuck in this world, simply do not know any better, and until we are liberated from this world we are doomed to ignorance and sin.

In addition to the escape from the cosmos, Lee also details other forms of escapist fantasy which are prevalent in gnostic thought and which are antithetical to the worldview that Berry, along with his most prominent characters, pursues. Among these is the escape "from the sacred community to the inner self," the denial of a corporate understanding of the faithful life, such as that found in the Pauline metaphor of the Body of Christ, toward a narcissistic, self-absorbed view of salvation (105). The exaltation of the conscience, or of that still, small voice within each believer, or (in more liberal versions) the awakening consciousness of each rational self, is symptomatic of a larger movement away from community in general and from the religious community in particular. In its extreme form, this brand of Christian individualism would result in the existence of churches of one, in which independence rather than interdependence, is the paramount virtue. Lee quotes the Rev. Ebenezer Frothingham, an eighteenth-century New England churchman:

If we rightly consider the Nature of Practice in Religion, on
Obedience to God, we shall see an absolute Necessity for every
Person to act singly, as in the sight of God only;...to bring the
Saints all to worship God sociably, and yet have *no dependence*

upon one another. (Lee 145)¹⁴

Despite movements such as the social gospel espoused by Walter Rauschenbusch, and despite the popularity of twentieth-century theologians like Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and his brother Richard, all of whom championed the virtues of community for the Christian faith, Lee contends that, in the wake of Norman Vincent Peale and other gossellers of the self, the narcissistic tendencies of Protestant Gnosticism continue to exercise a powerful authority over much of Western, and particularly American, Christianity.

Paradoxically, even while this branch of Christianity exhibits a tendency toward self-absorption, it also involves a hatred of the bodily self, a hatred manifest in its desire to escape the flesh. Elaine Pagels writes that orthodox Christianity "Implicitly affirms bodily experience as the central fact in human life. What one does physically--one eats and drinks, engages in sexual life or avoids it, saves one's life or gives it up--all are vital elements in one's *religious* development" (*The Gnostic Gospels* 101). Modern, Protestant gnosticism, like its ancient predecessor, has not affirmed the body. Rather than as a context in which one might glorify God, the body has often been understood as "an enemy from without, that constantly tries to undo the best efforts of the soul within" (Lee 130). When this mentality is pursued, Lee argues, especially in the area of human sexuality, one of two states will result, both of which were features of ancient gnostic Christianity. One path is to eschew sexuality (or sexual pleasure) completely, despising sex as the most depraved feature of an inherently corrupt human existence. The second path involves exalting sex, though not in its mundane forms, not as a significant element of family and communal life, but as

something wholly transcendent. This perspective would compel men and women to untether sexuality from the same kinds of limitations from which they seek to be freed in other areas of life, to seek out greater and greater sexual “experiences” or to inject into their sexual lives the same kind of esotericism that they pursue in their religious lives. In seeking to make sex more than it is--a sort of formula for solving all of our problems--people actually succeed in making it less. Thus, in his reading of Protestant gnosticism, Lee simultaneously illustrates how a number of our creaturely limitations and estrangements are perceived within the current cultural-religious context, and depicts a religious system that--as numerous others have noted--has shaped American thought and practice for centuries.

In his own writings on religion and spirituality, Wendell Berry rejects this system, on a number of fronts, yet--unlike Thoreau--he still calls himself a Christian, however uneasily and self-critically he employs this designation. First, and perhaps most significantly, Berry has spoken out against the dualistic view that he finds in much of what passes for Christianity. In a recent interview with Katherine Dalton, when asked directly about his religious beliefs, Berry was frank and straightforward in his response:

I was never satisfied by the Protestantism that I inherited, I think because of the dualism of soul and body, heaven and earth, Creator and creation--a dualism so fierce at times that it counted hatred of this life and this world as a virtue. From very early that kind of piety was distasteful to me. (33)

Elsewhere in his writing, Berry is able to render more precisely his argument

against this neo-gnostic worldview. In the essay “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” he states:

A dualism...between Creator and creature, spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work, and so on...is the most destructive disease that afflicts us. In its best known, its most dangerous, and perhaps its fundamental version, it is the dualism of body and soul...(105)

I will elaborate more specifically on Berry's debate with these dualisms, and also reflect on how his rejection of these cleavages comes to bear on his worldview, in later sections of this chapter. For now, I merely wish to point out that Berry is profoundly troubled by the dualisms he sees manifest in culture, and that one of the earliest contexts in which he encountered these dualisms was the church of his youth.

A second element of Lee's Protestant gnosticism that Berry would reject is the method of seeking enlightenment or illumination by means of a formula, an esoteric revelation, or some other quick-fix or shortcut to salvation that allows one to escape the estrangements of the world without truly reckoning with them. Among the aspects of life that Berry values most is good work. Among those that he mistrusts most strongly is cheap, shoddy work or craftsmanship that masquerades as “efficiency.” Thus, in an early essay, “Discipline and Hope,” from the collection *A Continuous Harmony*, he writes:

Nearly all the old standards, which implied and required rigorous disciplines, have now been replaced by a new standard of efficiency, which requires not discipline, not a mastery of means,

but rather a carelessness of means, a relentless subjection of means to immediate ends. The standard of efficiency displaces and destroys the standards of quality because, by definition, it cannot even consider them. Instead of asking a man what he can do well, it asks him what he can do fast and cheap....What we have called efficiency has produced among us, and to our incalculable cost, unprecedented monuments of destructiveness... (93-94)

In other words, Berry abhors a shortcut, whether in farming, in animal husbandry, or in religion. As one might guess from remarks in the essay quoted earlier, "The Burden of the Gospels"--indeed, even from the essay's title--Berry believes that religion, if it is worthy of the name, should not be easy. Following the commands and examples of Christ, embodying the kingdom of God in the ways one treats his or her neighbors, land, household, or body, is a profoundly important task, and one for which there is no shortcut. Thus the Christian faith is best approached, according to Berry, in the same manner that he approaches everything: with humility. Instead of presuming to be among the elite, enlightened few, Berry wears his "ignorance" almost as a badge of honor, with the caveat that this ignorance, as he calls it is constantly seeking the truth, constantly aware of its own limitations, but also hopeful for what might be possible.

So this is what Berry has rejected in terms of religious belief: A Protestant Christianity that--because of a tendency toward dualism and its penchant for escapist eschatological fantasies--has much in common with the Gnosticism of ancient times. But if Berry wants to continue to pursue a version of the good life that takes Christian narratives, Christian ethical practices, and even Christian

patterns of worship into account, without creating a God according to his own individualized image, he must locate himself somewhere within the tradition. And here is where Berry--in some ways an heir to the legacy of the American Transcendentalists--ultimately differs from them. Unlike Thoreau, Berry chooses even to remain a member of a local Christian congregation, and to draw not just from the sacred texts of Christianity, but from the living Christian community at present, a great deal of wisdom.

While Berry the writer is undoubtedly syncretistic in his thinking and in his appropriation of religious ideas that have shaped him, he has been greatly influenced in this regard by the Christian Scriptures. In order to arrive at the place where he could acknowledge and embrace this influence, however, Berry had to begin reading the Bible with a different set of lenses than those given to him by the church of his childhood. Thus, he began to read and understand the Bible as an Agrarian, as a member of a small farming community, as one close to the land and to the people who work the land. Within this context, he was able more clearly to understand his faith and his approach to the Christian tradition as one that brooks no dualism of any kind. Fundamental to his understanding of the entirety of Scripture is his understanding of the second chapter of the canon: Genesis 2, sometime referred to as the Yahwist account of the creation narrative. Using this chapter--not merely as a proof-text, but as a central idea that helps to shape a much larger story of humanity's existing from the beginning in an intimate relationship with the dust of the earth--Berry develops his religious worldview as one that "for better or worse" is part of the Christian tradition, but nevertheless finds much in this tradition that needs analysis and evaluation if it is

to be instructive rather than destructive.

This has implications for the way in which Berry, in his writings on religion and other topics, as well as in his fiction, approaches to the categories of corporeality, community, and creation. It should be noted that to separate these three realities for the purpose of analysis is to some extent a betrayal of Berry's religious vision. His grasp on these ideas is most distinctively characterized by the manner in which these things cohere. Indeed, for Berry, health and wholeness are impossible unless there is an integrated unity among such things as the body, the community, and creation as a whole. This is a quality found in nearly all of Berry's writings. As Janet Goodrich has stated, Berry's project is one of "finding connections among a love of nature, a love of people, and the structures of an organizing religious tradition" (88).

FLESH, COMMUNITY, AND CREATION IN BERRY'S WORK

In his discussion of the flesh, Berry brings together two of his most pressing concerns (and two of this dissertation's most pressing concerns) in the opening sentence of his 1977 essay, "The Body and the Earth": "The question of human limits," he writes, "of the proper definition and place of human beings within the order of creation, finally rests upon our attitude toward our biological existence, the life of the body in the world" (97). Among the questions he poses to his readers--questions that he deems both religious and agricultural--are the following: "What value and respect do we give to our bodies? What uses do we have for them? What relation do we see, if any, between body and mind, or the body and the soul? What connections or responsibilities do we maintain between our bodies and the earth?" (97). These questions, and the way the

author approaches their answers, are significant in that they demonstrate Berry's commitment to view these earthly, physical realities--body and earth--not only as worthy of respect, even as bearers of mystery, but also to view them as necessarily related to one another. To attempt to divorce the body from the soul, or to extricate either from their relationship to the earth, in the name of transcending human limitations or toward some other goal, is to deny the proper order of the universe.

In his perspective on the place of the human creature within the world, Berry could rightly be classified as a Christian humanist, one who both exalts human existence and also humbly acknowledges that "humans are small within creation." He understands the healthy human body as whole yet paradoxically dependent on other beings, other entities, for its health. The first of these entities, and perhaps the most essential, for--as Berry says--there is a necessary convergence of health and holiness, is the soul:

Perhaps the fundamental damage of the specialist system--the damage from which all other damages issue--has been the isolation of the body. At some point we began to assume that the life of the body would be the business of grocers and medical doctors, who need take not interest in the spirit, whereas the life of the spirit would be the business of the churches, which would have at best only a negative interest in the body. ("The Body and the Earth" 104)

As a result of this isolation, Berry argues, there emerges "a spiritual economy...within which the only law is competition...If the soul is to live in this world only by denying the body, then its relation to the world becomes extremely

simple and superficial” (105). This assessment certainly bears a strong resemblance to Lash’s description of exclusive mysticism, the version of spirituality that has little positive to say to the daily workings of our mundane politics and economies and is therefore of little relevance to men and women attempting to live according to the pattern of a Christian vocation.

Berry’s theology of the flesh, in contrast to much of what he perceives in both religious and secular cultures, has much in common with ancient and Medieval Christian thinkers like Maximus, who, according to Cooper, argued that only body and soul together can constitute a human being, (Cooper *Life in the Flesh* 153) and Thomas, who also asserted that a person’s integrity arises from the commensurability of the soul with specific characteristics of his own body (Cooper 154). He also finds affinity with a more contemporary idea like Merleau Ponty’s notion of body-subject, which states that the body is not only something I have, but also something that I am. It is both object and subject, instrumental and constitutive (Cooper 154). Thus, Berry levels criticism at versions of Christianity that affirm the doctrines of incarnation and the resurrection of the body in theory, but then spend the interim between the first and second comings of Jesus despising the flesh on which those two fundamental doctrines depend (“The Body and the Earth” 106). This is true not only of Berry’s non-fiction but also his fiction. Thus, he places in the mouth of Jayber Crow, the Port William barber who is also one of the town’s most theologically-minded characters, a question that could be Berry’s own, whether “Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it” (*Jayber Crow* 50).

Throughout Berry’s work, he addresses the mystery of the flesh as the

context of the sacred in the ways he treats significant moments of fleshly existence, from birth to death, including sexuality. In essays such as "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," he laments the ways that the common, modern view of the body as a machine, or as a conveyance for the mind or soul, has--in gnostic fashion--robbed the flesh, and with it, sex, of its capacity for mystery and holiness:

The public dialogue degenerates into a stupefying and useless context between so-called liberation and so-called morality. The real issues and problems, as they are experienced and suffered in people's lives, cannot be talked about. The public language can deal, however awkwardly and perhaps uselessly, with pornography, sexual hygiene, contraception, sexual harassment, rape, and so on. But it cannot talk about respect, responsibility, sexual discipline, fidelity, or the practice of love. 'Sexual education,' carried on in this public language, is and only can be a dispirited description of the working of a sort of anatomical machinery--and this is a sexuality that is neither erotic nor social nor sacramental but rather a cold-blooded, abstract procedure that is finally not even imaginable.

(122)

When even the body is approached in an analytical, antiseptic, and ultimately disembodied fashion, whether the discussion is about sex education and pregnancy prevention, modern medicine and artificial methods of prolonging life, or the concept of body counts in war as "collateral damage," the old dualisms that the spiritual, intellectual, and technological forces of the modern world have failed

to reconcile have effectively carried the day.

In response to this, Berry advocates a vision of the flesh in which “sexual love is understood as both fact and mystery, physical motion and spiritual motive.” He continues, “That this complex love should be reduced simply to sex has always seemed a fearful thing to poets” (“Sex, Economy...” 135). That Berry trains his poet’s eye, and its desire to see sacred mystery in fleshly life, not only on sex, but also on birth, death, health, work, eating, and virtually every other aspect of bodily existence, owes much to his Christian convictions and his commitment to read doctrines such as creation, incarnation, and resurrection as more than abstract ideas. Instead, these are realities that come to bear on his and his characters’ lives in the world.

Berry’s understanding of community is one of the most prominent features of his thought. It is also an element in his writings with which Christian readers sometimes have difficulty. On the one hand, there is much in Berry’s writing that points to the significance--even necessity--of communal life for spiritual or religious growth. In contrast to any version of spirituality or the pursuit of truth that would necessitate detachment from the limitations imposed by the presence of others, Berry cannot imagine how one might reach his or her potential apart from the influence and encouragement of neighbors and other fellow citizens. As Bonzo and Stevens have pointed out, the most striking characteristic of Berry’s vision of spiritual wholeness, as articulated in his essay “Health is Membership,” is its communal nature (23).¹⁵ In “The Body and the Earth,” for example, Berry writes, “Healing is impossible in loneliness; it is the opposite of loneliness” (103). Within the context of Berry’s Christian convictions, say Bonzo and Stevens, this

means that the follower of Christ is only intelligible as such not as an individual, but in the context of the larger body of Christ (26). Yet Berry's is not a utopian vision of community, in which the idea of people coming together or working together can eradicate all differences and conflicts. Rather, Berry's communities are decidedly imperfect. They are contexts in which hospitality is extended, and if one chooses to accept the invitation, he or she can enter into the larger body and begin the long and arduous process of experiencing reconciliation and healing in a number of ways.

Brent Laytham is a theologian who finds Berry's humble hope, his vision of community as aspiration rather than arrival, something that can both reflect and inspire the Christian community. Laytham points to four similarities between the "Port William membership", as the protagonists of Berry's fictions are collectively known, and the "*Communio Sanctorum*," the communion of the saints, as ecclesially-minded theologians have sometimes termed the church. These four common characteristics reveal both what is significant for Berry's vision of community and what is required if the Christian community is going to be a place of wholeness and health, rather than a setting in which the old dualisms and estrangements are exacerbated. First, Laytham says, the community must share a common ground. The members have to evince a love for and a commitment to a specific place. Second, Laytham says, membership in community is given rather than earned. The hospitality extended to those on the margins can be accepted or rejected, but it is not demanded or required. Third, the members of the community are held together by common labor. Fourth, this is a membership that includes the living and the dead. The memories, stories, and influence of

those who had earlier lived and worked in that specific place are legacies that continue to form the members still living (173-174).

These are elements that any reader of Berry's fiction will recognize immediately as central to the world that he has created. As his characters mature, Mat Feltner and Hannah Coulter and Andy Catlett and Elton and Mary Penn, among others, all come to realize that community--not just in the abstract sense, as a sort of totalizing idea, but in the very concrete sense of working for and with one another, of extending charity to the stranger and even to the enemy, of laying down one's life for another--is something without which they could not survive. This is a conviction that Berry articulates in his essays as well. In a 1986 piece entitled "Does Human Community Have a Value?" Berry challenges the widespread acceptance of community as a concept along with the equally widespread failure of our economic policies, our governmental policies, and our educational policies to demonstrate the concrete value of community on the ground, in any practical or powerful way (179). He argues that those who would point to "emotional or spiritual" benefits of community but miss the practical import of community life are misguided. He asks a series of questions that illustrate his own understanding of the connection between community as a practical, mundane context with routines, practices, and commitments, and the concept of community as an emotional, spiritual, or religious principle:

The values that are assigned to community are emotional and spiritual--"cultural"--which makes it the subject of pieties that are merely vocal. But does community have a value that is practical or economic? Is community necessary? If it does not have a value

that is practical and economic, if it is not necessary, then can it have a value that is emotional and spiritual? Can “community values” be preserved simply for their own sake? Can people be neighbors, for example, if they do not need each other or help each other? Can there be a harvest festival where there is no harvest? Does economy have spiritual value? (180)

At this point, Christian readers might understandably feel Berry’s critique leveled at them, as the questions he poses could rightly be asked of the church as a body or an institution--much like the government, or industries or education systems--that has often paid lip-service to the value of community without demonstrating that value in its daily existence. One of the obstacles to the Christian reader of Berry is that the churches of Port William are not the kinds of communities that Laytham describes. Indeed, if one wants to find true community, shared life, the joy of a common existence, one is advised to look to Burley Coulter and Jayber Crow, passing time at the barber shop, cutting tobacco in a neighbor’s field, or even drinking late into the night. Community is more easily and readily discovered there than in a Sunday morning pew, Berry seems to say. This has led some of Berry’s readers to argue that Berry is too hard on the church, that he holds the Christian community to too high a standard, and that the failure of the church, as represented in Berry’s fiction and in his essays, is in fact the failure of the local community as a whole (Bonzo and Stevens 172). I would argue that such objections are on the mark, but that is exactly Berry’s point. The tragedy of Christian community for Berry is that it is no healthier, and in some cases it is less healthy, than the culture it inhabits.

Berry's criticism of the church as a flawed or even failed community, I believe, is meant to serve as a wake-up call, a proclamation from within that points to all that is wrong and all that is possible. If the prophets and priests in Berry's fiction are not found within the church institution but rather outside it, that might serve to compel Christian readers to confront why the church does not provide the same kind of examples of justice and true community as the Port William membership often does. The thread that runs through Berry--that true healing and wholeness is ultimately impossible without community, that "holiness" is not obtained by forsaking the company of others and transcending the limitations that our obligations to others place on us--is one that the Christian community needs to hear. This argument is not only theologically sound, but offers much in the way of imaginative possibility. In a spiritual culture that values community as an idea, Berry argues, men and women would do well to rediscover concepts such as justice, love for neighbors and enemies, and hospitality toward strangers, including those who are voiceless and marginalized. These, say theologians like Nicholas Lash and Rowan Williams, are all necessary elements of true spirituality. Berry's prophetic characters, like the author himself, serve to assist the Christian community in rediscovering these qualities.

When one thinks of Wendell Berry the writer and the man, and of what is important to him, even before life in the flesh and life in community, one usually thinks of life in relationship to the created order. If Berry has sometimes been called a nature writer or an agricultural writer, rather than a storyteller who articulates the human condition, it is because a focus on nature, on the land, and

on how human beings interact with it, becomes fundamental to nearly every story that Berry tells. Much as his writings on community have done, his writings on nature and on the preservation of good land have often placed him at odds with the church, or with the mainstream culture of American Christianity. This was especially true in the earlier days of his career. Yet, from the early days of Berry's literary engagement with nature, there has always been something religious in his approach to these issues, even if he did not deem that approach "Christian."

In his 1970 essay "A Secular Pilgrimage," Berry explores the paradox at work in his own thinking on the relationship of institutional religion to the created world. He advocates a stance toward the world that acknowledges "the sense of the presence of mystery or divinity in the world, or even to the attitudes of wonder or awe or humility before the works of creation" (5). He even defines these sensibilities as "worshipful"--in the sense of valuing, or ascribing worth to creation, beyond what may be immediately known or observed. Yet despite the religious language employed here, Berry chooses to term the aspiration present in the nature poetry of his time as a "secular" pilgrimage, falling as it does outside the institutions of religion. In the work of Denise Levertov, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, William Carlos Williams, and others (one could also add to the list Berry's own nature poetry, or even his Sabbath reflections), Berry encounters all of the reverence for creation, a love for the world that is God's handiwork, that should be present within the Christian traditions that Berry had encountered but which was, tragically and puzzlingly, lacking.

Throughout this early essay, the reader encounters a theme that will inform much of Berry's writing on nature in subsequent decades: "the essential

double awareness of the physical presence of the natural world and of the immanence of mystery or divinity in the physical presence" (17)." In more explicitly theological language, this double awareness could be recognized as a sacramental imagination, a notion that has not been lost on Berry's theologically-minded readers. Berry, however, from the early part of his career through to his more recent work, has found such an imagination to be absent in an institutional church that has chosen the ways of the dominant culture, ways that include an economics of convenience, a politics of competition, and a gnostic dualism that allows believers to exploit this world while yearning for another. Despite Berry's polemical tone throughout this essay, he concludes it in a spirit of humility and hope, with a statement that points forward to further engagement with those themes and remains open to the possibility that, as a poet and a lover of the natural world, he still has much to learn:

It is necessary for me to say, ending, that this collection of quotations and comments is not meant to be taken as a definitive statement. Like most things said about poetry by poets, it is personal and somewhat arbitrary. It is an effort to suggest that there is in our poetry an impulse of reverence moving toward the world, toward a new pertinence of speech and a new sense of possibility. (33)

Janet Goodrich charts some of the ways in which Berry's perspectives on Christianity and its relationship to the destruction of good places and healthy communities has become more nuanced over time:

Berry's work of the sixties depicts a prophet whose perception of

nature as an organic whole worthy of reverence reacts against a world in which religious tradition and human relationships suffer from disintegration. The work of the seventies elaborates on Berry's hypothesis, at once defining more sharply the problems of human lovelessness and religious dualism and proposing a religion of nature as a solution to both. Reflecting the agricultural focus of Berry's life in this decade, his prophetic vision takes the imaginative shape of the farm, particularly in the poems of *Clearing*. But in the eighties, Berry adopts a more conciliatory attitude toward Christian tradition and introduces its ethic more overtly to the community of farmers surrounding Port William. The formal pattern of the poem further structures Berry's moral vision in the poems of *Sabbaths*. By the nineties, Berry has abandoned the notion of a secular creation altogether, arguing instead for reform of biblical Christianity. His suspicion of Judeo-Christian tradition evolves into a constructive use of its language and values as a means to restoring a nurturing attitude toward the earth...*Life is a Miracle* (2000), though less introspective, shows that in contrast to his earliest works, the prophet sees religion not as the problem, but as part of the solution to lovelessness toward all the living world. (89)

Thus, by 1992, Berry could produce an essay like "Christianity and the Survival of Creation." Originally delivered to students at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, the piece begins by addressing a problem: "That the culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and the

uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction are now established clichés of the conservation movement” (93-94). Berry does not acknowledge whether, in his younger days, he also subscribed to ideas much like these; if he did, it is obvious that he has come to realize that this perspective, with its swift movement toward indictment, is somewhat misguided. This does not mean it is unjust; Berry admits that centuries of destructive policies either enacted or underwritten by the church are evidence that “The certified Christian seems just as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder creation” (94). Rather, this clichéd indictment of Christianity is misguided, in Berry’s view, because it does not take into account “an adequate understanding of the Bible and the cultural traditions that descend from the Bible” (94). With characteristic humility, Berry confesses that he is not a biblical scholar; he is ill-equipped, he says, to present a thorough study of the Christian scriptures. However, he states plainly--and it is significant that he does so in a room full of Divinity students (not unlike Emerson, perhaps), the future leaders of the Christian community-- “Our predicament now, I believe, requires us to learn to read and understand the Bible in the light of the present fact of creation” (95). He asserts, as a native member of the Christian tradition speaking to other members of that tradition, that a renewal of Christian perspectives on creation is a necessary step for the survival of that creation (96). This is a goal that Berry embraces not in spite of, but because of, his Christian commitments. Therefore, rather than jettisoning the Bible or the Christian tradition entirely, or abandoning the Christian faith in favor of Buddhism or some other tradition he admires, Berry resolves to find within the Christian scriptures and tradition something positive

that he can cling to, some foundation in which a Christian ecology might be rooted.

Norman Wirzba and Ellen Davis, a theologian and a biblical scholar, respectively, have done as much as any readers of Berry to draw connections between the author's religious convictions (including his reading of scripture) and his commitment to working toward a healthier earth. These are similar connections to those articulated concisely by Berry in his essay "Health is Membership": "I take literally the statement in the gospel of John that God loves the world...I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God" (89). It is clear from this statement that, whatever Berry's feelings toward the institutionalized church might be (and admittedly, he still sees much within the institution that is harmful), he has grown more comfortable in recent years applying biblical--even evangelical--language to the crisis of creation. According to both Wirzba and Davis, Berry's agrarian vision--inherited not so much from the "Twelve Southerners" who took the name agrarian in the early part of the twentieth century as it is from thousands of years of careful farming practices has allowed him to rediscover the Christian tradition. Thoughtful reflection on the history of farming and on farmers' relationship to the land have thus provided lenses through which he can view his faith anew.

As a child, Berry received the scriptures as a storehouse of information about the soul, about heaven, and about other "religious" matters or "spiritual" realities. As an adult, reading scripture through the lens of his life and work as a farmer, he has re-learned to read scripture as also "a practical book about the

good use of land and creatures as a religious practice, and about the abuse of land and creatures as a kind of blasphemy" (Berry Foreword to *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* x). He has come to understand, as Davis has also come to understand in her own reading of scripture, that the Bible provides the narrative of a gift. According to this narrative, "the descendants of Israel were given, not a land, but the use of a land, along with precise instructions for its good care" (Foreword x). To quote Berry's insights along with Davis' is entirely appropriate, as Davis points to the New Agrarians such as Berry, Wes Jackson, and Norman Wirzba, as writers who have helped her to understand the ecological crisis from a biblical perspective, and have helped to shape her reading of the Hebrew scriptures as a narrative about agricultural land that is (to use terminology that echoes Berry's own) "literally invaluable" ("The Land I Remember" 119).

Like Wirzba's exposition of humanity's place in *The Paradise of God*, Berry ultimately roots his theology of creation in Genesis chapter 2, and its description of humanity's relationship to the earth, the soil, the *humus* from which men and women have their origins. As he says in "Christianity and the Survival of Creation:

For we are free, if we choose, to make a duality of our one living soul by disowning the breath of God that is our fundamental bond with one another and with other creatures.

But we can make the same duality by disowning the dust. The breath of God is only one of the divine gifts that make us living souls; the other is the dust. Most of our modern troubles come from

our misunderstanding and misvaluation of the dust. Forgetting that the dust, too, is a creature of the Creator, made by the sending forth of His spirit, we have presumed to decide that the dust is “low”. (107)

He further articulates the danger involved in this misvaluation elsewhere in the essay:

If we think of ourselves as lofty souls trapped temporarily in lowly bodies in a dispirited, desperate, unlovable world that we must despise for Heaven’s sake, then what have we done for this question of significance? If we divide reality into two parts, spiritual and material, and hold (as the Bible does *not* hold) that only the spiritual is good or desirable, then our relation to the material Creation becomes arbitrary, having only the quantitative or mercenary value that we have, in fact and for this reason, assigned to it. Thus, we become the judges and inevitably the destroyers of a world we did not make and that we are bidden to understand as a divine gift. (109)

Seeking to avoid these dangers, Berry relies on Agrarian wisdom to depict stewardship not as a restrained but still mercenary assertion or imposition of our will upon the land. He understands the dominion spoken of in Genesis chapter 1 not as an invitation to conquer the natural world but as a call to cooperation among fellow creatures, a mutual give-and-take that unfolds in the context of good and careful work and is beneficial to both parties.

Berry’s spiritual vision, like his economic and political and agricultural

vision, is a complex one. It brooks no isolation of any one part of life from another, but strives to bring the whole human being into relationship with his embodied self, with other creatures, with creation and--through all of this--to God. In arriving at this perspective, Berry has engaged thoughtfully the Christian traditions which had previously provided little satisfaction. Yet, in contrast to much of the Christian tradition, Berry these earthly realities do not function in Berry's spirituality as means to an end; they are significant for their own sake, each evidencing a capacity for sacredness. They are each part of a holy communion in which humans participate, and this participation is viewed as a gift, not as an obligation. For Berry, learning to participate faithfully in this community is a life-long task, one that is accomplished through apprenticeship to people who model wise and deliberate commitments to good work--in other words, vocation--and through inhabiting places in which these commitments might flourish. The learning of this task, for Berry, is a religious endeavor, and the goal is that one might be able to say, with one of Berry's favorite poets Kathleen Raine, "The sense of the holiness of life is the human norm" ("Christianity and the Survival of Creation 98).

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES IN MCCARTHY'S LIFE AND WORK

If Cormac McCarthy is notoriously reticent when it comes to personal matters and the nature of his work, he is equally reluctant to speak about his religious beliefs. In his 2007 interview with Oprah Winfrey--to date, the only live or televised interview he has granted--Winfrey posed to him the question, "So you haven't worked up to the God thing, have you?" McCarthy's answer provided little in the way of certainty or even clarity: "Well, it depends on what day to ask

me. Who or what to pray...doesn't really matter. You can be quite dumb about the whole business and still ask for help" (*Oprah* June 5th, 2007). This answer, its vague and non-committal nature notwithstanding, is perhaps the most definitive statement that the reclusive author has made regarding one of the great themes of his work--religion.

Here, as with so many elements of McCarthy's life and work, the reader is advised to let the novels speak for themselves. Critics who have turned to McCarthy's fictions in an attempt to puzzle out some clues that point to the author's religious beliefs or influences emerge from their readings, almost without fail, with a single classification of those beliefs and influences: gnostic. In any collection of Cormac McCarthy criticism, the word appears early and often. Everyone from Harold Bloom to Will Blythe, author of a 1998 profile in *Spin* magazine, has employed the term, so that it has become a kind of shorthand for McCarthy's religious vision. In reality, as Edwin Arnold and Barbara Brickman have both acknowledged, while gnostic systems of thought do exercise a heavy influence on McCarthy's writing, the author is syncretistic in the way he borrows from a wide range of religious and philosophical systems, including the ancient beliefs of Native American, Gaelic, and Druidic cosmologies, as well as more modern bodies of thought, particularly existentialism.

Perhaps no reader of McCarthy has engaged his early work from a religious perspective as carefully or as thoroughly as Dianne Luce. Her work *Reading the World* offers a nuanced interpretation of his Appalachian novels from *The Orchard Keeper* to *Suttree*. The book serves not so much to make a definitive statement regarding McCarthy's religious convictions as to present

what Luce calls the author's "intellectual biography." She explores the development of McCarthy's religious and philosophical interests as a kind of crucible in which his most memorable characters are formed:

These varieties of religious/philosophical experience are ways of encountering the world for McCarthy's characters, ways of reading the world for his narrators. His works engage with their symbols, myths, parables, or fictions (such as Camus's absurdist novels) to establish the fictional worlds and ontologies his characters inhabit. His narrators read the characters and their worlds through the lenses of these systems. Although one philosophical/mythic system predominates in some early pieces, McCarthy's mind and method are syncretic, and in his subsequent work he blends systems. Recognizing these influences does not and should not lead us to identify McCarthy the thinker as a gnostic, a Platonist, or an existentialist..." (viii)

Luce's reluctance to classify McCarthy is worth noting, and I have chosen to follow her lead; rather than classifying him as a gnostic or a Christian mystic, Luce correctly argues that McCarthy is working out of a vast network of religious influences, with the primary ones tending towards gnostic or anti-materialistic versions of the Christian tradition. The set of beliefs and perspectives he employs as a philosophical underpinning for his early novels leaves his characters ill-equipped to live out vocations of reconciliation and wholeness within the contexts of humanity's deepest estrangements; instead, their modes of life only serve to aggravate the conflicts and the divisions that exist within the world.

While Luce rightly acknowledges McCarthy's syncretism, she also explores the notion that throughout McCarthy's body of work, especially his earlier novels, two major strands of belief emerge as the most influential: Manichaeism and Valentinian forms of gnosticism. Having already discussed--through the work of Rowan Williams and Philip Lee--the most prominent characteristics of those forms of religious thought classified as gnostic, I will not rehearse here another attempt to define the term. However, before exploring some of the ways that various religious systems have influenced McCarthy's characters' perspectives and relationships to community, corporeality, and creation, it will be helpful to look at some of the specific movements that have shaped his characters most profoundly.

Hans Jonas, the renowned scholar of gnosticism and gnostic movements, has classified Valentinian and Manichaean thought as examples of two types of dualism present in the ancient world. The first type, which Valentinian gnosticism exemplifies, is Syrian in origin and--according to Jonas--is the more ambitious and profounder of the two dualisms. Jonas designates Valentinian gnosticism in this way because it seeks to derive dualism from within the godhead, thus diagnosing the same kinds of estrangements and alienation in the divine economy that also exist within the created order. The second form of gnostic dualism, Iranian or Manichaean gnosticism, starts with a struggle between two principles--one of light and one of darkness--and instead of burdening itself with an explanation of how that rift came to be, instead narrates how this pre-existent rift came to dictate the dramatic shape of world history. In the latter form of gnostic dualism, tragedy is forced upon the deity from an outside opposing force.

In the former, it comes from within. In both, however, the creation of the world--including the creation of humanity--results as a response to this tragedy rather than from the positive, creative, or even loving intentions of the divine. In both, matter is posited as a feature of the lower realm, the realm of darkness, ignorance, and suffering. The flesh is in no way redemptive, but is a sign of humanity's imprisonment. In both, the means of escape is presented as enlightenment; the imprisoned spirit must grasp a knowledge that will free it from its cell of fleshly illusion and ignorance (236-237). In her reading of McCarthy's Appalachian novels, Luce appropriates Jonas' argument that these two forms of gnosticism--while distinct--share a common mythological core, which leads to a certain fluidity in the ways that individuals or movements internalize their teachings. According to Luce, and to Leo Daugherty, novels like *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian*, with their emphasis on the forces of darkness that move with authority across the landscape of the world, borrow more heavily from the Manichaeian system in their symbolism and imagery than from the Valentinian worldview. However, Luce asserts, McCarthy's employment of these ideas, like that of most ancient gnostic movements--borrows freely and indiscriminately from both (68).

Jonas' later work, particularly an essay entitled, "The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology," draws some extended parallels between the ancient systems he explores elsewhere and a modern philosophical movement that, according to several critics, has exercised considerable influence on McCarthy's work: existentialism. Readers of McCarthy like William Prather often turn to the categories of existentialism to make sense of his characters and their

worldview (103). Jonas undertakes a reciprocal reading of gnosticism and existentialism that allows him to see both systems as analogous responses to analogous situations. Jonas rightly sees that the common notion which spans centuries to bring these two systems of thought together is exile, which critics have argued also plays a central role in McCarthy's fiction (as well as Berry's). Faced with crushing intimations of loneliness and alienation within a vast universe, and the terror that comes with an awareness of one's frailty, man experiences an existential dread. The dualism between man and cosmos is certainly an important feature of the modern world. But Jonas also wants to trace these feelings farther back:

There is one situation, and only one that I know of in the history of Western man, where--on a level untouched by anything resembling modern scientific thought--that condition has been realized and lived out with all the vehemence of a cataclysmic event. That is the gnostic movement. (216)

In both existentialism and gnosticism, Jonas sees a fatalistic approach that leads to despair. The elements present in both systems--a dualism between man and world, the alienation and terror experienced by humanity wandering in the cosmos--are found in McCarthy's novels, and point to the influence of both ancient and modern systems of thought in his work.

The origins of McCarthy's interest in these forms of thought, both religious and philosophical, likely run deep. Like Berry, McCarthy also seems to have rejected the religious traditions of his childhood. The scant biographical information that has been compiled on McCarthy indicates that his family was

Irish Catholic, and that he attended Catholic school in Knoxville. However, the novels seem to point to a rejection of this earlier faith tradition, as in the (possibly) autobiographical novel *Suttree*. As Luce illustrates:

Suttree's [McCarthy's?] memory is a relatively familiar indictment of twentieth-century Roman Catholicism--or more generally Christianity--as it is offered to children or withheld from the poor. The church serves no spiritual food to them. Rather, it is a "kingdom of fear and ashes," regimented, dogmatic, inspiring not hope but guilt, not spirituality but terror--a version of the gnostic nightmare. (257)

At various points in the novel, *Suttree* displays contempt for the church, telling a priest, "You don't know me" and asserting that the church is not God's house because the priests expel God when they exclude the least of his children. If *Suttree's* animosity toward the church is meant as a reflection, however veiled, of McCarthy's perspective, then even the most orthodox Christian would likely concur that McCarthy's criticism is justifiable, even prophetic. The church that neglects the poor, according to the standards of the biblical prophets and of the Christian gospels, is worthy of contempt.

Where McCarthy's rejection of his childhood faith differs from Berry's is in the direction that he goes from there. If Berry rejects the Protestant gnosticism that he encountered in the Baptist churches of his youth in favor of a Christianity that strives to create community and which emphasizes the significance of earthly, material realities, McCarthy rejects the institutional Catholic church and explores religious influences that would draw adherents--and which draw

McCarthy's characters--farther away from integrated networks of the fleshly self, the community of others, the created order and, ultimately, away from God.

McCarthy's most prominent characters therefore evince an alienated estrangement and either struggle in an attempt to transcend their own limitations or prey on others in their weakness, using the material limitations of others as a means of realizing their own transcendent will-to-power.

THE FLESH, COMMUNITY, AND CREATION IN MCCARTHY'S WORK

Cornelius Suttree, the existentialist rambler of Knoxville and one of McCarthy's most philosophical protagonists, utters what is perhaps the most memorable statement on fleshly existence to be found anywhere in McCarthy's fiction when he says, "What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle" (130). While the reader is wise to exercise caution before assigning Suttree's words or thoughts to his author, this perspective on the flesh, in which the body is seen as a vessel or--to use Berry's image--an envelope for the soul, and an unworthy one at that, is a notion that underpins the thoughts, words, and actions of a number of McCarthy's characters. It is also a notion at home within the gnostic dualisms described by Jonas. Suttree's statement concisely articulates both the notion that the flesh is depraved and corrupt and--as a consequence--the deity who conceived of the flesh must be depraved as well.

McCarthy's treatment of the flesh, throughout his body of work, and the manner in which his most prominent characters perceive fleshly existence, is one that leaves little room for the sacred. Flesh is objectified, despised, or preyed

upon, but never viewed as a context for holiness or an encounter with the divine. It excites lust, revulsion, and sadistic, predatory desire, but not reverence. Cornelius Suttree might give voice to the gnostic view, and Lester Ballard (whom I will discuss later) may be the most base violator of the flesh of others, but sentiments of indifference or antipathy toward the flesh are a common feature in McCarthy's work, especially in his earlier fictions. This perspective manifests itself in the way that McCarthy's characters treat significant moments of fleshly existence. Not surprisingly, this includes some unsettling depictions of sexuality. *Child of God* provides the most obvious examples of this, but sex does not fare much better in any of McCarthy's early works. It may involve incest, as in *Outer Dark*. It may involve prostitution, as in *Suttree* or *Blood Meridian*. Even, as in *Suttree*, when a sexual relationship seems to offer the hope of real human connection, McCarthy's protagonist retreats, as if to escape the possibility that sex and love, flesh and spirit, can truly coexist. One of the most consistent features of gnostic thought, in its myriad manifestations, is a belief that sex is distasteful and depraved. This perspective could lead gnostics either to abstain from sex completely or to engage in it licentiously, believing that their actions in the body had no bearing on the status of the enlightened spirit.

According to Jonas, Manichaean gnostics were suspicious of sex not only because of its inherent depravity but also because it resulted in reproduction, and therefore imprisoned more souls in this fleshly realm (228). Childbirth, then, in these systems, is something to lament rather than to celebrate. It is destructive rather than life-giving. Among McCarthy's characters, childbirth, like sex, is perceived in troubling ways. As Nell Sullivan has shown, when McCarthy depicts

the act of bringing a child into the world, he uses the language of death, epilepsy, even demon-possession (70). McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, opens with the birth of a "chap," the product of the incestuous relationship between Culla Holme and his sister Rinthy. Culla describes his sister's state as "sickness" and abandons her immediately following her labor, as if to demonstrate that there is no possibility for human connection in such a moment. What is worse, he takes the child from her, cutting the cord unceremoniously "like a hank of strange yarn" (14), before abandoning the newborn in the woods.

The novel *Blood Meridian* also opens with the birth of a child--the kid, the story's anonymous protagonist, a sort of everyman doomed from the beginning of his life. His mother dies in childbirth, so that the kid's first act is one of violence against someone he loves. His birth, then, ushers him into a world of violence in which he will participate, yet within which he will never be fully at home. His existence, then, typifies the gnostic plight of one who--at his core--is good, and perhaps even has some divine spark within him. However, he is imprisoned, by virtue of his birth, and by virtue of his flesh, in a world of violence and sin.

If birth is an event characterized by brutality in these narratives, death is even more so. Even the most casual reader of McCarthy's fiction--including his later books but especially his earlier ones--notices what Will Blythe calls "a world of hurt inside these novels...so blood-soaked, so depraved, so dismembering" (62). Blythe goes on to say that "McCarthy's violence feels like real violence--ugly, disorienting, utterly meaningless" (62). McCarthy does not invest the deaths of his characters, any more than their births, with any particular reverence. In the worlds that he creates, birth and death and most of what comes in between are

bloody and messy and marked by exile, alienation, and futility. The fleshly lives that McCarthy's characters endure are not--cannot be--contexts within which transcendence might unfold. The chosen means of transcendence, then, are the paths of self-exaltation and the predatory destruction of the weak--the making of sacrifices to the distorted and violent desires of those who seek to consume their neighbor.

The reader looking for positive representations of community in the work of Cormac McCarthy will find in his earliest novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, and his most recent novel, *The Road*, the most prominent examples of such a possibility. Yet even these two examples are not wholly positive. In the latter, community exists within a post-apocalyptic world. A father and son forge a relationship of mutual trust and sacrifice without which neither could survive. It does present, therefore, a strong vision of the possibilities of community which might indicate the point at which McCarthy is arriving later in his life. He has stated that his relationship with his son served as inspiration for the novel. However, the fact that the novel depicts such community after an apocalypse--after a sort of reset button has been pushed for humanity--should provoke more questions than answers about the possibilities of community in this world.

In the earlier novel, McCarthy narrates the tenuous and unlikely fellowship of three characters--John Wesley Rattner, Uncle Ather, and Marion Sylder--brought together through violent and tragic events, who nonetheless establish a sort of community. Furthermore, they live on the outskirts of a town called Red Branch, a farming community that has more or less ceased to farm and, according to John Grammer, has adopted an insular, reactionary posture toward

the encroaching forces of the urban, industrial culture that is spreading through East Tennessee and threatening to swallow up whatever pastoral communities still exist (35). By the end of the novel, the communities that McCarthy has depicted have indeed dissolved, so that John Grammer, in conversation with Vereen Bell, has remarked that the communities in this novel exist to depict “the insubstantialness of communities” (33).

If this is indeed how McCarthy chose to represent community in his first novel--as a good idea, even a positive force, but nonetheless one that is doomed to fail--it is far more sanguine than the vision he later presents. In most of his works between *The Orchard Keeper* and *The Road*, communities are depicted as dysfunctional and destructive aggregations of dysfunctional and diseased individuals. When one attempts to form community or to join with society, as John Grady Cole does in *All the Pretty Horses* or Rinty Holme does in *Outer Dark*, hospitality is usually denied. Ultimately, this denial may work to the outsider's benefit, for when an attempt to enter community succeeds, the results are often disastrous. When the kid joins a rapacious band of scalp-hunters in *Blood Meridian*, only to discover that a group of people, far from accomplishing anything positive, or providing any sort of accountability for one another, is merely able to wreak havoc on a level unimagined by a solitary young man. When Culla Holme joins with the unholy trinity of *Outer Dark*¹⁶ and shares in the meat they offer him, he discovers only his own cannibalistic, destructive impulses.

Faced with these sorts of options, a character like Cornelius Suttree, after attempting (though perhaps only half-heartedly) to forge community among the

renegades and outcasts living on the fringes of Knoxville, chooses to go it alone. Throughout most of the novel, Suttree resides mostly in a houseboat on the Tennessee River, thus embodying an untethered existence. At the novel's end, he finally leaves town, one step ahead of death--the implication being that it is only by virtue of his unrootedness, and the lack of true connection between himself and those around him, that he is able to escape. He thus serves as a type of the existential wanderer, the twentieth-century nomad for whom community is the ultimate limitation.¹⁷

The theological moorings of McCarthy's nomadic characters are by no means obvious, but a possible and plausible influence can be found in the work of Christian mystics in the vein of Jacob Boehme. Boehme, a prolific writer on mysticism and spirituality in the early seventeenth century, was persecuted during his lifetime, but later influenced thinkers like John Milton, Sir Isaac Newton, George Fox, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. His thought has also influenced Cormac McCarthy. Edwin Arnold has traced some of the ways that Boehme's cosmology shaped McCarthy's approach to the natural world in his Border trilogy ("McCarthy and the Sacred" 116), and McCarthy quotes Boehme in an introductory epigraph to *Blood Meridian*: "It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness."¹⁸ In discussions of McCarthy's work by critics, Boehme's name appears more frequently than any other single religious thinker, indicating at the very least that Boehme's views hold considerable interest both for McCarthy and for his readers.

Like many of McCarthy's characters, Boehme sought to escape this world of illusion and disorder, and to transcend the estrangements that manifested themselves in his life. According to John Joseph Stoudt, in the introduction to Boehme's *The Way of Christ*, his search was an inward one and a solitary one:

The way to Christ is really the search for the Logos of being that lies deeply embedded in the life of faith. It is a quest that man must go freely and alone; he cannot be forced to travel a well-marked, frequented road. But neither can he deny the dynamic which drives him to search for an escape from the threat of meaninglessness which hangs, like the proverbial Damoclean sword, over his inner life. This threat is the terrible abyss of human despair, and must be avoided at all costs. (xiii)

In this description of Boehme's spiritual journey, which centers on the individual's all-consuming desire for an escape from meaninglessness, Stoudt also offers glimpses of existential despair and of the gnostic tendency toward focusing on the Logos within. Along these lines, Cyril O'Regan has also pointed to the influence of gnosticism on Boehme's thought; perhaps it was through his readings in gnosticism that McCarthy discovered Boehme, or vice-versa. Whatever the connection, it is likely that Boehme's presentation of the solitary seeker can be seen both in the way McCarthy's wanderers move through the world, and in the ways that he depicts communities as contexts not of holiness and health but rather of depravity and destruction magnified.

McCarthy's approach to the created world is the element of his thought in which the syncretism of his religious and philosophical vision is most clearly on

display. From the Celtic ethic of *The Orchard Keeper* to the influence of Boehme's and Native American cosmologies in the Border Trilogy, with the Manichaeism of *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian* sprinkled in for good measure¹⁹, it is possible to see in McCarthy's fiction a myriad of different, sometimes contrasting, views on nature and humanity's place in it. Complicating matters further is the evidence, in McCarthy's work with the Santa Fe Institute, that he is committed to working toward a healthier, more sustainable ecology, whether or not he ultimately thinks such an ecology is possible. Thus, one reader will claim for McCarthy an inhumanist view (Phillips 37) and another will classify his work as complex pastoral²⁰ and both can be correct. Edwin Arnold has argued convincingly that McCarthy's work should be read as a mosaic, an interconnected, intertextual body of stories, characters, ideas, and fictional worlds. This approach, however, does not eliminate the difficulty involved in discerning a specific worldview as far as creation is concerned in McCarthy's works.

Perhaps a neat and tidy classification of Cormac McCarthy's theology of the created order is not only impossible but also unnecessary. For the distinctions among these various cosmologies--or at least the way that McCarthy and his characters appropriate them--are ultimately not as significant as what they share. In each of McCarthy's novels, his characters, whatever religious or philosophical vision they embody, are unable to conceive of a world in which they might be at home. Norman Wirzba speaks of the properly Christian view of the world as one in which hospitality is the fundamental virtue, so that humanity's perception of the created order is one in which, in the words of John of

Damascus, creation is the “making room for the divine place that God is” (Wirzba 19). In other words, creation is a context in which man serves God by serving the earth, and thus worshipfully inhabits a hospitable and generous space. In McCarthy’s fictional world, his characters decidedly do not meet God within nature. For them, nature is a context of struggle and conflict. To echo both Boehme and the Manichaeian gnostics, this world is a realm of darkness. Faced with the necessity of either overcoming the darkness or fleeing it, McCarthy’s characters envision the natural world as a realm of dread, of death, but never of hospitality or generosity.

Sara Spurgeon has argued for another point of origin for McCarthy’s cosmology. Having rejected the pastoral tradition of the South (and along with it the agrarian tradition that shapes Berry’s life and work), McCarthy, says Spurgeon, has appropriated the Sacred Hunter myth as a foundational narrative. According to Spurgeon, within this myth there is room for both an intimate relationship to the natural world, and also for the bloody struggle between man and nature that unfolds within McCarthy’s narratives (77). This idea works to a point, in that McCarthy’s characters--as Wesley Berry and others have pointed out--are far more adept with a rifle than a plow, and far more likely to slay a living beast for sustenance than to harvest a crop. However, even if there is a religious element within the myth that McCarthy’s characters appropriate, borrowed from Native American cosmologies or from other ancient sources, it does not change the fact that within McCarthy’s stories the narrative involving man and the natural world is always adversarial. The reason that Native American hunters can hunt, and eat what they have hunted, respectfully, is because they maintain a

reverential posture toward the earth as an important part of their life. McCarthy's characters, whether hunting, farming, or merely walking through the woods, envision themselves locked in mortal conflict with the earth, the realm of darkness. They must dominate or be dominated, destroy or be destroyed, escape or perish.

Among the most vivid elements of McCarthy's prose is the skill with which he conveys emotions and sensations like dread and hunger. These are the sentiments of characters who lack a meaningful, hospitable connection with the natural world. For them, the created order cannot be a realm of pilgrimage, but rather one of perpetual flight. Life is a constant struggle with nature, and as *The Road* attests, McCarthy seems to believe that this struggle will not end favorably for humankind.

CONCLUSION

Throughout their lives, both Berry and McCarthy have been shaped by a variety of influences--teachers, neighbors, other writers, and most significantly, religious texts and traditions. These have all contributed to their work, including the ways they depict realities such as corporeality, community, and creation. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the characters that Berry and McCarthy create, and the communities those fictional characters inhabit, also bear the marks of these influences, and thus embody or reject the vocations of priest, prophet, and pilgrim in their everyday actions and interactions.

CHAPTER 4

THE PRIESTLY IN THE FICTION OF WENDELL BERRY

Despite common readings and misreadings of Christianity that characterize the tradition as being against the flesh, or scandalized by the flesh, it would actually be difficult to overestimate the positive role that flesh plays in the Christian tradition. Adam Cooper's work, *Life in the Flesh*, cites by way of example Luther's proclamation that "I know of no where to find God except in the flesh of Christ," as well as Tertullian's earlier, and perhaps even stronger statement, "The flesh is the hinge of salvation" (5). The notion that fleshly existence may constitute a limitation--even a weakness--but, in Cooper's words, "this weakness is precisely the privileged point of Divine activity" (4), is the idea at the heart of the priestly vocation, one which several of Berry's characters embody in their relationships to one another and to themselves.

Like their creator--whose perspectives on the potential for holiness within corporeal life were explored in the previous chapter--the citizens of Port William, Kentucky, Berry's community of protagonists, are a fleshy bunch. It could be argued that many of those belonging to the Port William membership--those who are not marginal or transient to the place, but whose lives are heavily invested in the people and the land there--qualify for the priesthood. Indeed, that is how it should be in a community that strives for health and wholeness within the corporeal limits of human existence. They spur one another on in committed

fulfillment of a common vocation of the flesh. There are, however, a few of the community's members whose insights and actions evince a particularly profound adherence to the responsibilities of the priestly vocation. I will focus here on two: Jack Beechum and his nephew Mat Feltner.

That these two are related is not merely a coincidence, but neither is it necessary to their shared vocation. For although the vocation of priesthood is not hereditary, passed down through a bloodline, it is learned. As with the other two vocations I will discuss, the role of the priest is best acquired through apprenticeship--a process usually more implicit than explicit. It comes through a lifetime spent observing carefully the patterns of life and the discharge of duties that a mentor, probably someone older, exhibits in his or her way of being in the world. This not only corresponds to Berry's deliberate emphasis on community in all of his writings, but also to what most observers would argue is true about life in the real world as well.

Among the numerous other reasons why these two men stand as such powerful examples of the priestly vocation in Berry's fictional world, I will explore two ways in which they recognize the potential for sacredness in fleshly life: in the realm of the erotic, which includes sexuality, marriage, and childbirth; and in the realm of death and grief, the bodily transition--either through violence, sickness, or old age, from this life to another. This is not to say that these two realms are wholly separate or always distinct from one another. As Berry's characters demonstrate, the most significant priestly work is sometimes accomplished in the intersection between the two realms. Because he understands the significance of the incarnation and of kenosis, the priest

recognizes that there is both beauty and vulnerability in the flesh, both of which lead to the possibility of sacredness. He or she is able to celebrate the beauty and to embody compassion toward the vulnerable. In contrast, the anti-priest, which I will explore later, is ashamed of the beautiful and preys on the vulnerable. Thus, both of these moments in the priestly life, and especially the moments--rare as they might be--in which the two are comprehended together, as distinct but related contributions to a reconciled and reconciling life, are significant. Both require a patient and intentional investment in the life of the body. And both, in Berry's fictional world, are embraced by his two most priestly figures.

In terms of the history of Port William (though not date of publication) the reader of Berry's work first encounters the priestly work of Jack Beechum in the short story "Pray Without Ceasing." Written in 1992, the brief narrative, as recounted by Berry's writer character, Andy Catlett, takes place in 1912. It tells of the events of a Saturday morning in July of that year, when a violent rupture intruded into the young life of Mat Feltner, and when Mat's uncle Jack bore with his nephew the terrible, bodily burden of grief and all of its attendant emotions. After reading a newspaper article about the murder of his great-grandfather Ben Feltner, shot by Thad Coulter, Andy travels to speak with his grandfather Mat and his grandmother Margaret. It is from Margaret that Andy hears the whole story of what happened on that day in 1912, a story that she prefaces with the statements, "It's a wonder that Mat didn't kill Thad Coulter that morning," and a few moments later, "If it hadn't been for Jack Beechum, Mat would have killed him" (43). Thus she makes it clear that this story, while certainly a story about bloodshed--the kind of story that would interest any curious young man seeking

to learn the details of his family's and his community's past--is primarily a story about Jack. It is a story about the role that Jack played in young Mat's life on that violent day--not only in honoring his experience of grief, but also in helping to prevent any further, needless spilling of blood.²¹ This is not lost on Andy, who remarks: "That was the point. Or it was one of the points--the one, perhaps, that she most wanted me to see" (43).

After laying the groundwork (though under no illusion that any explanation might prove adequate) for the shooting that serves as the catalyst for the story's action, Margaret arrives at the moment when her husband, at that time a man of twenty-eight, knelt by his father's lifeless body, holding his wrist as if in an attempt to summon forth a pulse where there was none. Mat then rises, "a man new created by rage," bent on the destruction of the man who had killed his father (59). It is here that Jack Beechum enters the story, to fulfill his priestly vocation even among a collective of characters--from Ben to Thad's daughter Martha Elizabeth to Mat himself--already ministering patiently and bodily to the needs of others.

When Jack hears the news of Ben's shooting, he leaves the store where he is conducting business and rushes outside, where he encounters Mat, running toward him from his father's side. Berry describes the encounter in a manner that employs the language of visceral, bodily struggle to convey the weight of the moment:

Without breaking his own stride, he [Jack] caught Mat and held him. They were both moving at the same speed, and the crowd heard the shock of the impact as the two men came together. Jack could

hardly have known what he was doing. He had had no time to think. He may have been moved by an impulse simply to stop things until he *could* think. At any rate, as soon as Jack had taken hold of Mat, he understood that he *had* to hold him. And he knew that he had never taken hold of any such thing before. (60)

As the struggle continues, it exacts both a physical and emotional toll on Jack:

He had caught Mat in a sideways hug that clamped his arms to his sides. Jack's sole task was to keep Mat from freeing his arms. But Mat was little more than half Jack's age; he was in the prime of his strength. And now he twisted and strained with the concentration of utter fury, uttering cries that could have either been grunts or sobs, forcing Jack both to hold him and to hold him up. They strove there a long time, heaving and staggering, and the dust rose up around them. Jack felt that his arms would pull apart at the joints. He ached afterward. Something went out of him that day, and he was not the same again. (60)

This is written in the language of childbirth, so that the newly created man of rage that Berry had described just paragraphs earlier was being reborn once again through this heaving, grunting process. Whether Berry intends it to be so or not, however, there is also in this description the language of kenosis. In his encounter with this young, grieving man, Jack has given himself--emptied himself--completely. This is no detached moment of ministry to the suffering, but rather an embodied, sacrificial taking up of another's burden, one that left the compassionate fellow-sufferer exhausted and irrevocably touched in both body

and spirit.

But if Jack is somehow weakened by this powerful exchange, it is equally obvious that Mat is changed as well. Indeed, Jack, in his priestly role, has presided--perhaps unwittingly, himself an instrument of some mysterious force--over something like a rite of passage. It is a sacramental moment of transformation, in that Mat is changed both inwardly and outwardly:

And what went out of Jack came into Mat. Or so it seemed, for in that desperate embrace he became a stronger man than he had been. A strength came into him that held his grief and his anger as Jack had held him. And Jack knew of the coming of this strength, not because it enabled Mat to break free but because it enabled Jack to turn him loose. He stepped away, allowing himself to be recognized, and Mat stood still. To Jack, it was as though he had caught one man and let another go. (60)

Where Mat had been, in his moment of stricken vulnerability, at the mercy of his anger, he was now able to straighten up, to meet Jack's concerned gaze with a deliberate gaze of his own, and to speak the words verbally that his body had already communicated to his uncle: "Pa's dead. Thad Coulter has shot him" (60). And then, instead of resuming his pursuit of vengeance, he returns home to minister to his mother, by virtue of a strength mysteriously bestowed upon him through his uncle's kenotic embrace.

But Jack's priestly vigil on behalf of the Feltner family does not end with his and Mat's struggle in the street. Later, after Ben's body has been laid in his bed at the Feltner home, Jack embraces the quiet that has descended upon the

house. It is a quiet that is “wonderful to him” and he “could not bear to break it,” because it affords him the opportunity, approximating prayerful reflection, to think about what Ben had meant to him, how he had mentored and encouraged him throughout his own youthful struggles. But most significantly, Jack shares the quiet with Mat:

Jack watched Mat as he would have watched a newborn colt weak on its legs that he had helped to stand, that might continue to stand or might not. All afternoon Jack did not sit down because Mat did not. Sometimes there were things to do, and they were busy. Space for the coffin had to be made in the living room. Furniture had to be moved. When the time came the laden coffin had to be moved into place. But, busy or not, Mat was almost constantly moving, as if seeking his place in a world newly made that day, a world still shaking and doubtful underfoot. And Jack both moved with him and stayed apart from him, watching. When they spoke again, they would speak on different terms. In its quiet, the house seemed to be straining to accommodate Ben’s absence, made undeniable by the presence of his body lying still under his folded hands.

Jack would come later to his own reckoning with that loss, the horror and the pity of it, and the grief, the awe and gratitude and love and sorrow and regret, when Ben, newly dead and renewing sorrow for others dead before, would wholly occupy his mind in the night, and could give no comfort, and would not leave. But now

Jack stayed by Mat and helped as he could. (72)

It is in this quiet that Jack, a man of few words, continues to minister to Mat, to preside silently over the mysterious but powerful change that is taking place in his nephew. It is a change that finally allows Mat to exhibit his greatest strength in what was perhaps his most trying moment--when a group of men from the town approach Mat with an offer to exercise vengeance on his behalf:

"It's only up to you to say the word, and we'll put justice beyond question."

And in the now-silent crowd someone held up a coil of rope, a noose already tied. The doctor gave a slight bow of his head to Mat and then to Nancy who now stood behind Mat and to his right. And again the crowd murmured and slightly stirred within itself.

For what seemed to Jack a long time, Mat did not speak or move. The crowd grew quiet again, and again they could hear the swifts chattering in the air. Jack's right hand ached to reach out to Mat. It seemed to him again that he felt the earth shaking under his feet, as Mat felt it. But though it shook and though they felt it, Mat now stood resolved and calm upon it. Looking at the back of his head, Jack could still see the boy in him, but the head was up. The voice, when it came, was steady: "No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do that." And Jack, who had not sat down since morning, stepped back and sat down. (74)

Finally, after a brief speech from Nancy, Ben's widow, Mat extends--in his own priestly gesture--an invitation to the table: "Come and be with us. We have

food, and you all are welcome” (74). Even several decades later, Margaret is struck by the profundity of Mat’s refusal of vigilante justice and his gracious hospitality: “‘I can see him yet,’ my grandmother said, her eyes, full of sudden moisture, again turned to the window. ‘I wish you could have seen him’” (74). And it is obvious, in the way that Margaret has related the story to her grandson, that she realizes that Mat’s strength at the end of that trying day would have been impossible were it not for the actions of Jack Beechum in the long hours preceding.

“Pray without Ceasing” is a story about a murder; ultimately, however, it is a story about the ways in which a community copes with loss, and ministers to one another in the midst of that loss. Throughout the narrative, Jack Beechum exemplifies what it means to fulfill the priestly vocation in the presence of those who are suffering. His actions, from the moment that he meets Mat in the street near the spot of his father’s murder, to the moment when he steps back on the Feltner porch and sits down for the first time in hours, are at no point designed to draw attention to himself. He is most often silent. He is content to stand behind Mat, or off to the side. Yet, he is never detached from the situation as it unfolds. Not only is he unmistakably and wholly present within the quiet heaviness that descends upon the Feltner family and especially upon Mat; he also bears in his body their very grief; he moves when they move; he is still when they are still. He walks the narrow line between unobtrusive humility and active concern as only a true priest, the man or woman who incarnates compassion, can do. And because of Jack’s quiet but powerful pastoral presence in the story, Mat also begins the process, which will unfold throughout the remainder of his life, of living into his

own priestly vocation.

Given this narrative of origins concerning the deep bond that Jack Beechum and Mat Feltner share, it is not surprising that when Mat and his family are in need of pastoral care thirty years later, Jack once again fulfills his priestly role in their lives. Berry's novel *A Place on Earth* provides a snapshot of the life of the community of Port William during a particularly trying period. The Second World War is raging, and has taken away from Port William a number of its young men, including Mat and Margaret's only son Virgil. Also feeling the loss is Virgil's wife Hannah, who is pregnant with his daughter. As the novel opens, Virgil has been pronounced missing in action, and in the wake of this news Berry chronicles the anguish that so often accompanies the act of hoping for the best while anticipating the worst.

As respected and beloved members of the community, the Feltners are not alone in their suffering. As in "Pray Without Ceasing," Berry demonstrates ways in which members of the community minister to one another, forming an unspoken but powerful priesthood. He also demonstrates the exception to this kind of care. Midway through the novel, as the Feltners' cautious optimism about Virgil has been all but extinguished, Berry presents a mild counter-example of the truly priestly members of the community, and something of a foil to the priestly work of uncle Jack, by recounting an occasion of an official pastoral visit. A peripheral character in the novel, as well as a peripheral member of the community, Brother Preston, the local preacher, "looked like a saint. But not a fisherman saint like Saint Peter or a carpenter saint like Saint Joseph; his mild scrubbed face shone with a kind of congenital goodness, as though, before birth,

he 'd washed his hands of the whole world" (32). Like other clergymen in Berry's fiction, Brother Preston has elevated the practice of being in Port William without being of Port William to an art form. His ministry is an abstracted rather than an embodied one. Every movement seems to be carefully measured not in obedience to what the situation demands, but rather out of obligation to some distant but pressing responsibility. Because he attempts to serve the community from a distance, without ever truly engaging in its common life, when the opportunity arises to speak to the Feltners in their grief, he finds himself woefully out of his depth.

Where Berry aptly and effortlessly described the work of Jack Beechum in "Pray Without Ceasing" as an incarnate, priestly response to a crisis that seems to have risen organically out of Jack's core, as a result of years of living among, and caring for the Feltners, Brother Preston's visit to that family's home is anything but organic. Here, Berry uses the language of specialized professionalism, even in conveying the ministerial way that Brother Preston stands on the porch before entering the home:

He draws a small black leather Testament out of his coat pocket and faces the door and knocks. His knock itself is an act of ministerial discretion; the sound is perfectly modulated, both quiet and loud enough. As he waits he continues to face the door, standing erect, lifting himself slightly forward now and then onto the balls of his feet, patting the little Testament with a sort of correct casualness against the palm of his hand. (95)

The "correct casualness," meant no doubt to balance the "ministerial discretion"

so as to present an idealized impression of the pastor at his work, does little to put Brother Preston at ease in his surroundings. This is why Margaret's hospitality to the uninvited guest is "a little disconcerting; she is putting him at his ease--which is not why he has come" (95). Her request that he make himself at home is made in earnest; the reader, however, cannot help but acknowledge the irony. Berry goes on to describe Brother Preston's struggle to feel the slightest bit at home:

He sits down as she leaves. Her footsteps go back along the hall. Again in his imagination he sees her: her hands reaching behind her as she goes, untying the apron. He sits erect in the chair, holding the Testament in his lap. The attitude of his body seems to isolate him from the room, to hold out to it a formality alien to it. Some part of his presence is withheld from it; he might be sitting in the tall-backed chair behind his pulpit. (96)

When Margaret speaks, summoning Mat to join them, her voice only exacerbates the preacher's isolation, because it reminds him that he is alien to this home, an unnecessary appendage clumsily grafted into the life that is unfolding there:

Out of the sound of her voice--not speaking to him now, remote from him--and out of the look and atmosphere of the room where he sits, there comes to him the sense of the completeness of this household, the belonging together of Mat and Margaret Feltner, the generosity of these people, in which there is maybe no need for him. He feels himself alone here. He is alone in his mission which, whole in itself, surrounds him with its demands, and isolates him.

Uneasiness coming over him, a swift tremor, he thinks of the burden of his duty. And then, as though under the pressure of his own hand, he knows his old submission to the mastering of this duty, and he knows he will do it. (96)

That Brother Preston would feel “the burden of his duty” in this moment is to be expected. The priest who seeks to fulfill his vocation of service, especially in giving oneself to meet the needs of others, will always feel the weight of his task. However, for one who is serving in an embodied way, whose compassion is a response to an incarnated concern rather than a sense of responsibility, there will also be some measure of joy, or at least of wholeness, in the service. What Brother Preston feels is not joy, and not wholeness, but rather alienated anxiety.

This is not to say that Brother Preston makes no attempt to connect with the Feltners, even to be present in the moment. He is able to extract himself from his isolated and isolating thoughts long enough to scan the faces of the women-- Margaret and Hannah--who sit with him as they wait for Mat:

His mind only half-occupied by the conversation, the preacher watches Hannah. She is wearing a clean white smock, the sleeves turned back from her wrists. Her heavy hair is drawn neatly back from her face. She is a beautiful girl; he has thought so often before. And he thinks so now, as always a little startled to find that he does so emphatically think so. He watches her face, alert for some sign of what she must be feeling, but he discovers nothing. Her face is composed and quiet. He both wishes and fears to know her thoughts.

And he watches Margaret. He believes that he sees in her face the marks of her grief for her son--but no sign that she expects to be comforted, or asks to be. To the preacher she also seems to be a beautiful woman. But hers has long ago ceased to be the given beauty of a girl; it is beauty that she has kept, or earned, through all that has troubled her and aged her. (96)

Berry makes it clear, in this moment, that Brother Preston has something in him that allows him to minister to people in all their particular, fleshy glory. There is something of the erotic in his vision of the two women for whom he is trying desperately to provide comfort. There is nothing scandalous or salacious in his impression; indeed, in acknowledging the women's beauty, and the qualities that distinguish one beauty from another, it seems that this is the closest Brother Preston will come to exhibiting a healthy attitude toward the body, an attitude that is otherwise lacking in his work and in his way of being in the world. However, the near-realization that there is something holy about the flesh makes him uncomfortable. He is startled at his recognition of Hannah's beauty, and seems to draw back, not because he is tempted to depravity, but because he cannot see into the troubled spirit of the woman sitting before him, and he fears the mystery that resides there. Whatever possibility the moment holds for real, human connection, however, the moment passes, and when Mat arrives Brother Preston seeks to transcend the moment by resuming his professionalized air of concern.

Instead of being more at ease when Mat joins the women, Brother Preston is now, strangely, more alienated than he had been: "Now, in the faces of all three of the Feltners, there seems to Brother Preston to be a secrecy preserved

against him...It is as though their very grief is an affirmation of something that they refuse to yield to him" (98). The reader knows what Brother Preston fails to see--that the Feltners are not conspiring to shut the preacher out of their lives. Their detachment in this moment of need is merely a response to the habitual detachment Brother Preston has demonstrated toward them and toward the rest of the community during his time in Port William. Brother Preston wrests the conversation away from small talk and steers it toward his purpose: "My friends, I've come because I know of your trouble." Again, the reader--and perhaps the Feltners--is made aware of the distance between preacher and audience: the distance between knowing the troubles of another, and knowing *of* the troubles of another. It is a distance that has been cultivated throughout Brother Preston's ministry, as he has attempted, perhaps unconsciously, to exist at a remove from the daily, ordinary lives of his congregants. It is a distance that no amount of eloquent, sitting-room preaching can traverse.

As Brother Preston communicates to the family the message he has carried into their home, Berry focuses on Mat's response:

At the beginning Mat only half listens. He sits, staring out the window, like a boy in church. But knowing what must be the difficulty of the situation for Margaret and Hannah, his attention is drawn to them, and his separateness from the voice of the preacher is destroyed. He watches the two women, sorry for them, determined to bear with them, as dumbly as he has to, what must be borne. (98)

Mat's attention to the sorrow that the women are feeling, his determination to

bear their burdens with them in silence, speaks to his own priestly role in this moment. It is a role that he might have learned from Jack on that day when his father was murdered, and one that he fulfills well on this day when grief visits his home yet again. Brother Preston continues, speaking of the Heavenly City, attempting to extinguish the family's sense of loss by means of imagery conveying "the final hope, in which all the riddles and ends of the world are gathered, illuminated, and bound. This is *the preacher's hope, and he has moved to it alone*, outside the claims of time and sorrow, by the motion of desire which he calls faith" (99).²²

However well-intentioned the preacher's visit may be, however well-prepared his words, they fail to bring the hope for which they were designed. Mat turns to look out the window before turning back to Brother Preston, who sits, "with his head tilted so that the lenses of his glasses reflect the window. In his rapt intent face the opaque discs of light look exultant and blind" (99). Thus, Brother Preston, for all his impassioned rhetoric, for all his sincere faith in the heavenly hope, has failed to see clearly how the Feltners are suffering, nor to be in that moment of suffering with them. Mat and Margaret nod in his direction, "not so much attentively as indulgently....offering to *him*, out of some kind of hospitality, the safe abstraction of his belief. They are releasing him from the particularity of the time and place, and of the life he is talking about" (99). The reader understands, of course, that no such release is necessary; Brother Preston was never really bound to the particularity of time and place, or of the life he was talking about. He is a man far more comfortable dealing with disembodied abstractions than with particular times, places, or lives. And

because he remains in the realm of the discarnate, his visit, like his brief discourse on the hereafter, fails to bear any fruit.

In contrast to this strange and awkward collision between a family's need and a religious professional's obligation, Berry crafts a later episode. After the birth of her daughter, Margaret, Hannah returns with the child to the Feltner house. It is, of course, a bittersweet homecoming, full of both the joy that new life brings and the lingering questions, now all but answered, about the fate of the child's father. As a gentle calm begins to settle over the scene, a knock at the kitchen door signals that a visitor has arrived. It is Uncle Jack. His visit to the Feltner home on this occasion is, in his mind, "a formal social call" (383), yet everything about the visit, from the point of entry—the kitchen door rather than the front door—to his clumsy but reverent hesitancy toward stating his purpose, signifies that this event is markedly different from Brother Preston's earlier intrusion, which, despite his "correct casualness," was far more formal.

This distinction, and with it Jack's priestly, pastoral function, is nowhere more evident than in the time that Jack spends with Hannah. After entering the room and seeing the baby, he asks how Hannah is feeling. The reader understands, along with Hannah, that although this may appear to be "small talk," there is a genuine concern in Jack's question. After the opening exchange, Berry relates that "Hannah changes the subject. She makes the sort of bright conversation with him now that she usually does, asking him questions, talking of pleasant inconsequential things". Through it all, Jack "stands beside her, nodding, answering, smiling, admiring—utterly happy." In the peaceful moment that Berry creates for Jack to inhabit, the reader is reminded of Jack's earlier,

watchful silence on the day of Ben Feltner's murder. Absent is the burden of obligation that Berry conveyed so precisely in his earlier description of Brother Preston. Absent is any sense at all that Jack has to do or say something in order to make this moment significant. Instead, Jack realizes the uncanny but attractive sacredness that the moment contains, with or without his contribution: "This room, redolent of mothering and birth and renewal, though he can't approach it in words, draws him to be in it, to lighten and warm himself in the idea of it" (231). As one who recognizes and loves the beauty of woman and mother and child, even if he cannot put words to this love, Jack inhabits this ordinary moment as one enjoying a religious experience.

What follows, however, is even more remarkable, both to the reader and to Hannah. Margaret, ever the vigilant caregiver, hints that Hannah needs to sleep, evidently assuming that Jack will take that as a signal that his visit has come to a close. Instead of leaving, however, Jack promises that he will be quiet and encourages Hannah to rest. This simple gesture, which is on the one hand inappropriate but on the other so wholly fitting to the occasion, amuses Hannah, and she nods to Margaret, indicating that Jack can stay. In the moments that follow, Jack essentially makes himself invisible. He is careful "not to look at her or make a sound," because "It wasn't, anyhow, to make conversation that he came. He has come in Hannah's honor" (232), to bear witness to the beauty of this young woman. Equally significant, though, is the way that Jack is able to hold in tension with all this beauty the sting of loss as well. For he has also come because there has been building in him a sense of the absence of Virgil Feltner. He has come aware of the vacancy surrounding Hannah's life and the child's.

And he stays now because of that, sitting in that vacancy, though he knows that his presence there “will never fit or fill it” (232). Jack has neither the intention nor the capability of manipulating the moment in any way. He cannot bend this experience to his will, through practiced rhetoric or through rehearsed actions. He seems to apprehend the truth that has eluded Brother Preston: that grief, like joy, is bigger than he is. It is not meant to be fixed or analyzed or expounded upon, but merely shared. And so, his ministry to Hannah is the inverse of Brother Preston’s. Where the professional preacher was isolated yet all-too-visible, both to himself and to others, Jack is wholly present while at the same time conscious of just how small he is.

Throughout the remainder of their time together, the clumsiness of Jack’s actions only underscores the notion that he is neither a professional counselor nor one trained in pastoral ministry. His manner is unpolished, even to the point of embarrassment; yet his presence is all the more profound because of it. He draws from his pocket a sack of candy, desiring more than anything for Hannah to enjoy what he enjoys. When he realizes that the packaging makes the gift too sorry an offering for the young woman, he panics, and proceeds to eat all of the candy himself. But in the awkwardness of the moment,

as from the extremity of his embarrassment, Hannah grows aware of the greatness of his caring for her. She understands...that he is not there because he is flattered by her small attentions; he has come to offer himself. In all her life she has known nothing like it. She sees how free he leaves her. His love for her requires nothing of her, not even that she find it useful. He has simply made himself

present, turning away, as he has now, to allow her to sleep if she wants to. She feels enclosed by this generosity as by a room, ample and light. (233)

Hannah is not the only one moved by this display. Readers are also touched by the enormity of this man's generosity, and by the depth of his simple, unselfish love for this young mother. Berry uses this moment, especially in its contrast to the earlier visit from Brother Preston, to convey to his readers that community, hospitality, and compassion are not qualities that one learns in detachment--certainly not in a seminary or "preacher's college". These things can only be truly learned, and practiced by one--like Uncle Jack--who is willing to share himself, completely and bodily, with others.

This priestly service of watching and waiting, of giving himself completely in honor of Hannah Feltner, a new mother anticipating her widowhood, points forward to a final moment, years later, when Berry crafts a scene from the final days of Jack's life that bears witness to this man's priestly capability of recognizing and affirming the sacred in the beauty of fleshly existence. In this brief episode, there is no momentous event that needs commemorating, no clumsy offering of gifts--indeed, there is very little remarkable or even intentional about the scene at all. Instead, Berry demonstrates that by means of his quiet existence, his unassuming but wholly present way of being in the world and of being near those he loves, Jack Beechum fulfills his vocation and thus sanctifies the lives of those around him.

The characters in this scene, from the novel *The Memory of Old Jack*, are the same as from the earlier one: Jack and Hannah. Much, however, has

changed in the decade or so since Jack sat and watched over Hannah's sleep with reverent concern. Hannah has married Nathan Coulter, one of Virgil's closest friends who survived the war and returned to Port William to resume life anew. Margaret, the daughter Hannah bore in Virgil's absence, has been joined by her younger brother Mattie, and now Hannah is carrying a third child as well. Jack has also changed. He is not as physically strong as he had been when he visited Hannah at the Feltners. He is tired, spending much of his time in reverie, journeying back and forth between past and present. Yet, as the scene between Hannah and Jack unfolds, Berry illustrates how the bond between this old man and young woman, a bond that is both bodily and spiritual, has only deepened with time:

They walk slowly up the street toward Mat's, Hannah holding to the old man's arm as if to be helped, but in reality helping him. And yet she knows that, by taking that arm so graciously bent at her service, she *is* being helped. She is sturdily accompanied by his knowledge, in which she knows that she is whole. In his gaze she feels herself to be not just physically but historically a woman, one among generations, bearing into mystery the dark seed. She feels herself completed by that as she could not be completed by the desire of a younger man....She is moved by him, pleased to stand in his sight, whose final knowledge is womanly, who knows that all human labor passes into mystery, who has been faithful unto death to the life of his fields to no end that he will know in the world.

As for Old Jack, he listens to the sound of her voice, strong

and full of hope, knowing and near to joy, that pleases him and tells him what he wants to know. He nods and smiles, encouraging her to go on. Occasionally, he praises her, in that tone of final judgment old age has given him. "You're a fine woman. You're all right," he says. And his tone implies: Believe it of yourself forever. (81)

In this passage, Berry emphasizes the qualities that have made Jack's life among his fellow citizens of Port William, and especially among the members of the Feltner family, so significant. There is the bodily connection: Just as Jack's body moved in a synchronicity with young Mat's on that day four decades earlier, when they struggled to give shape to the grief they were forced to confront, the burden of which Jack was willing to bear, here Jack walks together beside Hannah, his arm in her hand giving strength to both. But this is also, as surely as it is a moment of physical connection, something more as well. The fleshly contact provides a space in which knowledge can pass between the two, knowledge about the profound beauty that is Hannah's by virtue of her being "not just physically but historically a woman." Jack seems to understand the mystery of this beauty, in a way that, as Hannah recognizes, a younger man would not.

Jack, for his part, is strengthened in the presence of Hannah's youth, her vitality. The moment that passes between this older man and this much-younger woman is erotic, but certainly not in any way that would provoke or promote shame; there is not even the twinge of fear that Brother Preston had earlier felt in Hannah's presence. Instead, what Berry depicts here is a loving celebration of the flesh as a context of holy mystery. The moment culminates finally in a benediction that will endure far beyond the encounter, shaping Hannah's

perspective in the way that his actions at her bedside had done years earlier: “You’re a fine woman. You’re all right,” he says. And his tone implies: Believe it of yourself forever. And so, with the closing of this scene, as with many of the scenes in which Jack Beechum is presented, Berry brings his reader, as he has so many of his characters, to a moment of epiphany: This old man, who has seen more of life than anyone else in Port William, has become—not just by virtue of his age, but by virtue of his humility, his simplicity, and his righteous love—a priestly figure, a man who may be unlettered in the ways of theology, but is nevertheless the pastor that Port William needs and deserves.

The priesthood--like any vocation worth having--is most often passed down from one generation to the next, apprenticed to those who are observant enough and willing to adapt its rhythms and its demands to their own lives. Mat Feltner, through the many years that he lives in Jack Beechum’s presence, becomes a sort of apprentice to his uncle. It is unclear in Berry’s fiction whether Mat realizes just how much he has learned from Old Jack. Much more obvious are the myriad ways that Mat, like Jack before him, attends to fleshly existence and embodied presence as a context in which true care, genuine compassion, and thus real growth toward wholeness, occurs. I have already mentioned, somewhat in passing, several brief instances in which Mat’s ways of caring for those around him seem to reflect Jack’s priestly way of being in the world. Mat’s concern for his mother in “Pray Without Ceasing,” his invitation to the table at the end of that same story, and his compassion for Margaret and Hannah during Brother Preston’s visit could all be described as priestly actions.

There are others as well: moments in which Mat, like Jack and like every

truly priestly figure, demonstrates an embodied love for those who belong to the Port William Membership. Mat's commitment to his priestly vocation is most powerfully illustrated, however, first in the moments and then in the days that follow the death of his predecessor. Berry narrates the event, and Mat's response, in *The Memory of Old Jack*. Jack's landlord, Mrs. Hendrick, contacts Mat when Jack fails to appear at breakfast one morning. Mat finds his old friend, his uncle, and his mentor in a posture of rest, seated in his rocking chair. Mat is first struck by how natural, "how like himself," Jack looks, despite the fact that he has been dead for several hours. In the moments immediately following Mat's discovery, Berry gives an account of how deeply felt this loss was in its particularity:

Mat, who had known many deaths, who had foreseen and even hoped for this one, nevertheless felt an onset of grief he did not expect. For only a moment he might have wept, and then the knot of grief in his throat dissolved and spread all through him, taking the shape of his own flesh, so that he seemed illuminated and clarified to himself by this completion of so much that he knew.

(147)

The grief that Mat experiences here is not encountered--cannot be encountered--in a mode of detachment. Neither can it be escaped. Rather, it takes the shape of Mat's own flesh, and only in doing so, only in revealing itself in a moment of fleshly vulnerability, does it illuminate and clarify the significance of the moment. As he stands and reflects on what has happened, it occurs to Mat that the peace of this moment will, inevitably, be intruded upon, and very soon.

The undertaker, the preacher, even Jack's daughter and son-in-law, in their eagerness to impose upon the occasion from the outside their own notions of propriety and holiness, will all violate the beautiful integrity of Jack's life and of his death. Mat, therefore, pulls a chair to the side of Jack's rocker and sits a while with his friend, visiting with the dead, inhabiting a moment that Mat knows to be sacred because he feels it in his very flesh.

Perhaps most significantly, before leaving, Mat extends a gesture of farewell and solidarity:

And then he got up and lid his open hand briefly on the dead man's shoulder--that touch of the hand, that welcome or farewell--by which Ben Feltner was bound to Jack, and Jack to Mat, and Mat to his dead son and to his living grandsons--he touched him with that casual and forever binding salute. And then he left him and went out to tell those who must be told. (148)

It is a gesture signifying that the bond that exists between these two men is neither wholly spiritual nor wholly physical, but rather a union that has encompassed both men completely, and which is governed by its own mercy and its own justice. It is in response to this union, then, that Mat chooses to inform the men in the field, those who had shared their life with Jack, of their friend's death, before telling the undertaker or even Clara, Jack's daughter, who had done everything in her power to distance herself from the life her father lived and from the place where he lived it. And it is in response to this union, and not to any other arbitrary sense of obligation, that Mat embarks upon his role of fulfilling his role as a priestly guardian of the dead. Mat thus feels himself "set upon by the

stubborn sense of appropriateness that has ruled or troubled him ever since,” a stubbornness proper to the very serious position that Mat now occupies in the community (148). The moment thus signifies a kind of rite of passage, an ordination, which Mat acknowledges to himself as he stands with the men in the field, sharing the news with them--not merely relaying information, of course, but actually *sharing* the news: “Mat felt the change upon himself. Now he was the oldest, and the longest memory was his” (149).

Mat's concern for Jack, his fleshly ministry to this man, does not, therefore, end with Jack's death. Instead, Mat continues to care for his friend in a manner that is both bodily and spiritual, and which preserves the integrity of the two. In his phone call to the undertaker, he requests that Jack's state in death should honor his attitude in life; he thus requests the coffin that he knew Jack would have chosen--in other words, the least expensive, least ostentatious one they have. Similarly, in his meeting with the preacher, Brother Wingfare, Mat requests--or rather, orders--that the young minister honor Jack's memory by resisting the tendency to overspiritualize the moment or to use the occasion as an opportunity for a kind of religious showmanship. His statement in response to Brother Wingfare's (quite appropriate) expression of sorrow speaks volumes about the distinction between the two men: “I don't know that you should be particularly sorry. After all, you didn't know him particularly. And it's not a tragedy when a man dies at the end of his life” (150). The preacher, taken aback by Mat's frankness, nonetheless recognizes in this man--with his white hair and “the dirt of the field on his clothes”--a wisdom and an authority not easily attained (151). This is perhaps why, when Mat presumes to tell the “religious professional,” the

trained expert, how to do his job of burying the dead, the preacher hardly registers a word of protest.

Because of his careful attention to what he knew, beyond mere speculation, to be the wishes of his uncle, Mat feels “the perfection of his defeat” when Jack’s body, the body he had sat with in the moments following Jack’s passing, arrives at the Feltner home for the wake:

For the coffin testified to its costliness with the assertive elegance of the Pettits’ automobile--a veritable Cadillac of a coffin. Its sedately burnished lid opened upon a spotless drift of white as deep and soft as a summer cloud. Upon that cumulus of eternal ease, Old Jack lay in a dark, richly woven suit, a white shirt and tie. The face raised upon the satin pillow had been stuffed and smoothed to look not as Old Jack had ever looked. Only his hands, which lay in undissembling lifelessness at his sides, bore an indelible resemblance to what they had been. They seemed to have grown with utter incongruity out of the sleeves of the president of a bank. (151)

Berry then pronounces a particularly damning statement upon all those--undertakers and their kind--who would so dishonor a man’s spirit by dishonoring his flesh: And now Mat held him only in his mind (151).

In the long hours that follow, as Mat alone sits awake with the body through the night, and as he works all the next day, Mat attempts to take hold, in the silence of Jack’s voice, of some concrete memory, appropriate to his relationship with this man. When his thoughts finally settle on such a memory it

is, significantly, a moment from Mat's youth, a moment when he tried to impress his uncle, hard at work, with some 'lengthy and abstruse' principle he had learned from a college textbook. He was met with Jack's brusque reply: "If you're going to talk to me, Mat, you'll have to walk" (157). It was a pivotal moment in the relationship and in Mat's life, a moment in which the bodily, the particular, put the abstract mind in its proper place. Without the walk, the talk was only of dubious significance. It is a memory that undoubtedly comes to Mat because it speaks of Jack's disdain for all that is disembodied.

This is a memory that likely continues to occupy Mat's thoughts the next morning, as he stands graveside and wishes, principally, to "be away from this that has nothing to do with Jack's life--or, for that matter, his death" (159). He is initially hopeful, when Brother Wingfare reads the Psalms that he has been given and then closes his Bible. However, when the preacher begins a lengthy prayer--spoken less for the benefit of God or, certainly, for the deceased and more for the edification of those gathered and, most of all (Mat suspects) for Brother Wingfare himself--Mat "exercises for the first time his prerogative as the oldest man. He turns his back and gazes upon the fields" (159). This is a gesture that, far from being inappropriate or disrespectful, embodies a protest against all those forces that would so profoundly misunderstand and dishonor what a man's life was all about, attempting to honor his soul when they had refused to honor his flesh. It is a gesture that, in Mat's estimation, is infinitely more proper to the occasion than either the undertaker's or the preacher's art could aspire to be. It is an action not of detachment, but rather of solidarity with the dead. It is thus a priestly action, one that grows out of years of sharing in the particularities of life

with a man, and then having to say goodbye. And it is an action that demonstrates all that Mat, now the oldest member of the Port William Membership, has learned from his friend.

LESTER BALLARD: "CHILD OF GOD" AND ANTI-PRIEST

Wendell Berry certainly presents his readers with negative examples of treatments or approaches to fleshly existence. A few that I have discussed, particularly the town preachers, Brothers Preston and Wingfare, could accurately be classified--to borrow Philip Lee's terminology--as "Protestant Gnostics": men who, despite their best intentions, subscribe to a piety that harbors suspicions against anything too fleshly or earthy. These men, along with others in Port William, therefore reflect inadequate perspectives on fleshly life. The characters that Cormac McCarthy creates, however, operate on a more extreme wavelength than any who populate Berry's fictional world. Perhaps this is because McCarthy himself seems to have been most heavily influenced by authors--like Dostoyevsky, Melville, and Faulkner--who engage in fiction on a cosmic, even mythical scale. Perhaps it is because McCarthy has plumbed more deeply and more directly into the actual texts and commentaries on gnosticism, instead of inheriting that viewpoint at a remove, filtered through contemporary American Protestantism. Whatever the reason, McCarthy's characters manage to illustrate not just what it looks like to embody a vocation such as priest inadequately, but rather what it means to distort or subvert the vocation entirely, so that a character's existence becomes a gross parody of the vocation properly understood.

Even among a motley panoply of extreme characters in McCarthy's work,

many of whom articulate or exhibit unsettling or even profoundly disturbing attitudes toward the fleshly existence of themselves and of others, Lester Ballard stands out. Perhaps more than any character that McCarthy has created, Lester displays that mixture of ashamed contempt for the flesh and a simultaneous, predatory obsession with the same, a desire to transcend one's own bodily limitations and to consume others in their vulnerability, that designates not just the failed pastor, but the anti-priest. And yet, despite Lester's shocking uniqueness, McCarthy wants to make clear that this young man has come from somewhere. He is not a myth, a monster, or a bogeyman, he is "A child of God, much like yourself perhaps (*Child of God* 4). This is a fact that the novel's title--albeit ironically, perhaps--proclaims; yet it is no less shocking for that proclamation. Lester Ballard's actions, his ways of being in the world, may be without excuse, but they are not without explanation. Thus, as Edwin Arnold argues in an essay on the moralistic nature of McCarthy's fiction, "McCarthy spends a third of the book setting up the reasons for Lester's otherwise unimaginable actions, creating a world in which such actions have a cause" ("Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness" 55). Dianne Luce takes Arnold's assessment further when she remarks that "Lester is emblematic of the society from which he arises" (*Reading* 161). Near the novel's end, Lester states, "I don't know nothin about no bodies" as a way to avoid implicating himself in his crimes (*Reading* 161). However, the reader understands that what Lester does know about bodies, how he perceives them, has been learned, just as surely as Mat Feltner learned about bodily concern from Jack Beechum, and Jack from Ben Feltner.

The lessons that Lester has received regarding the flesh have not only served as the building blocks of his profoundly disturbed psyche, but have also constituted an apprenticeship in the anti-priestly vocation, an apprenticeship that began early on, when he finds the body of his father, who had committed suicide, hanging from the rafters in the barn. McCarthy narrates the event through a third-party observer, as though the speaker is attempting to account for Lester's actions, perhaps to a journalist or a lawyer:

I don't know. They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself. They was just the one boy. The mother had run off, I don't know where to nor who with. Me and Cecil Edwards was the ones cut him down. He come in the store and told it like you'd tell it was rainin out. We went up there and walked in the barn and I seen his feet hangin. We just cut him down, let him fall in the floor. Just like cuttin down meat. He stood there and watched, never said nothin. He was about nine or ten years old at the time. The old man's eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his tongue blacker'n a chow dog's. I wisht if a man wanted to hang hisself he'd do it with poison or somethin so folks wouldn't have to see such a thing as that. (21)

This explanation could serve as a narrative of origins regarding Lester's strange relationship to the flesh. The description of Lester's reaction to the event, "He came in the store and told it like you'd tell it was rainin out...He stood there and watched, never said nothin," seems to express that perhaps the initial shock of his father's death afflicted the young boy with a sort of detached paralysis, an

inability to reckon with the enormity of the moment. At the same time, the narrator describes the act of cutting down the body as “Just like cuttin down meat,” a naturalistic turn of phrase, completely devoid of larger significance, that seems to reflect his--and perhaps his community’s--difficulties in dealing with death. It is also a phrase that bears resemblance to Adam Cooper’s assessment of the body’s place in the world: “And so the body will be meat for those who want it to be meat” (2). According to Gary Ciuba, the influence of Lester’s father’s suicide extends far beyond the moment: “Lester grew up under the shadow of that parental violence, for almost twenty years later when the Ballard farm is auctioned, the rope from which the nine-or ten-year-old saw his father hang still dangles from the loft in the barn” (79).

The novel provides other examples of “reasons” for McCarthy’s actions (or “lessons in the flesh”), some of which even more explicitly involve the community which produces Lester, and the ways that those around him harbor dysfunctional attitudes toward fleshly existence. Again, Arnold asserts, in terms borrowed from the work of Rene Girard and often applied to McCarthy’s works by his critics²³, that “Lester is created by those around him, a necessary figure of the community, the scapegoat that embodies their weird alienation and stoked violence, but also their terrible sadness, their potential nothingness” (“Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness” 57). Among the ways that Lester’s community shapes him involves that community’s problematic relationship to that other mode of fleshly existence, the realm of the erotic. This element of Lester’s world receives its most pointed--and most darkly comical--treatment in McCarthy’s description of the local dumpkeeper and his daughters:

The dumpkeeper had spawned nine daughters and named them out of an old medical dictionary gleaned from the rubbish he had picked. These gangling progeny with black hair hanging from their armpits now sat idle and wide-eyed day after day in chairs and crates about the little yard cleared out of the tips while their harried dam called them one by one to help with chores and one by one they shrugged or blinked their sluggard lids. Urethra, Cerebella, Hernia Sue. (26)

This brief passage, with its drowsy evocation of the girls' bodies, coupled with the revelation that their father had named them after terms found in a medical dictionary, underscores a sort of confused perspective on the flesh.

Immediately following the introduction of the daughters, McCarthy shifts to the language of animal sexuality:

They moved like cats and like cats in heat attracted surrounding swains to their midden until the old man used to go out at night and fire a shotgun at random just to clear the air. He couldn't tell which was the oldest or what age and he didn't know whether they should go out with boys or not. Like cats they sensed his lack of resolution. (26-27)

And finally, he uses language that vividly connects the degeneracy of the girls' sexual practices with their junkyard surroundings:

They [the swains] were coming and going all hours in all manner of degenerate cars, a dissolute carousel of rotting sedans and niggerized convertibles with bluedot taillamps and chrome horns

and foxtails and giant dice of dashboard demons of spurious fur. All patched up out of parts and lowslung and bumping over the ruts.

Filled with old lanky country boys with long cocks and big feet. (27)

This swirl of car parts and body parts, in which one is indistinguishable from the other, creates a picture of the state of sexuality in Lester Ballard's world. It is a world where the flesh, including the stillborn child of the dumpkeeper's twelve-year-old daughter, is not only "rank and fetid," but ultimately expendable, "small lumps of yellow shit wrapped up and laid by" (27). It is a world in which the dumpkeeper, upon coming across "two figures humping away" in the woods, would watch a while, oblivious to the fact that one of the two figures is his own daughter. All the more troubling, when he realizes her identity and chases the boy away, he proceeds to beat and to rape his own child, before "heist(ing) up his overalls and lumber(ing) toward the dump like a bear" (27)

"Then there was Ballard," McCarthy writes.

He'd come up the path with his narroweyed and studied indifference and the rifle in his hand or on his shoulders or he'd sit with the old man in the bloated sofa in the yard drinking with him from a halfgallon jar of popskull whiskey and passing a raw potato back and forth for a chaser while the younger girls peeped and giggled from the shack. (27)

This was Lester's apprenticeship, his process of being mentored in the ways of fleshly sexuality. When read along with his earlier encounter with the dead body of his father and the unceremonious way that death was handled by the men of the town, it is not surprising that the lessons Lester absorbed from those around

him would shape his perspectives on fleshly existence so that as an adult he would embody the predatory vocation of the anti-priest.

Tutored by his community in these unhealthy perspectives on the flesh, at twenty-nine years old Lester begins to assume the mantle of his twisted priesthood, which he will embody in a manner more extreme than anything his community was able, or willing, to imagine. Thus, as Brian Evenson argues, Lester becomes McCarthy's quintessential nomad, one who distances himself farther from society with each day, and with each bloody act, ultimately arriving at a point where others mean nothing to him, save as objects to be manipulated for his own pleasure (44). Unsurprisingly, Lester's priesthood takes shape within the joined contexts of death and the erotic. Berry's characters saw the potential for something sacred in the beauty and vulnerability of the flesh, and sacrificed something of themselves to protect and sanctify that beauty and that vulnerability. Lester--formed by bloody and base encounters with dead and sexual bodies, and driven by murderous lust--elevates his destructive tendencies to a religious realm in which he seeks not to watch over and care for those around him, in the manner of a true priest, but to consume and destroy them, in the manner of a violent god. Thus, Ciuba argues that in his actions, Lester is "living out his bloody godhead" (80).

Lester's desire is not for fleshly, human contact, but for something far greater: absolute power over other creatures. He is attempting, in Bonhoeffer's terms, to become *sicut Deus*, like God in his authority and in his ability to transcend all limitations and to embrace unadulterated freedom. Even in the world described by someone like Girard, a world where sacred violence has its

place, Ciuba argues, “McCarthy’s overreacher blurs the distinction that is the source of all other distinctions. Ballard eliminates the difference between the pious regard for sacred violence and the desire to arrogate such heavenly fury for his own power, between being a child of God in the biblical sense and being a brutal godling himself”. And later, “He makes transgression the very sign of his transcendence” (78). Having effectively created his own religion, with his own desires at its center, Lester will ultimately have no choice but to serve as its priest, enacting all manner of rituals designed to answer those desires, by sacrificing the flesh of others for his own satisfaction and exaltation.

Lester’s engagement with this brutal, distorted religion of the flesh unfolds as a steady progression. His desires and his means of feeding them escalate in intensity and bloodiness, as Lester’s own shame and obsession simultaneously increase. And at every stage, he descends deeper and deeper into his estrangement. Lester thus begins by watching from a distance. His journey toward brutal and god-like violence is initially voyeuristic. In common parlance, he is a “peeping-tom,” aroused by the possibility of looking upon flesh without having to engage it, maintaining the autonomy of detachment and exercising the power that resides in the gaze. But of course, voyeurism is never a harmless or a victimless transgression. In his discussion of pornography and its relation to distorted perspectives on fleshly existence, Adam Cooper argues that pornography “inevitably cultivates a view of the human body in which the body’s deployment and use as an object of more or less violent manipulation follows as a logical step (78).” He further reflects on the pornographic writings of authors from the Marquis de Sade forward as contexts in which “the worship of sexual

pleasure and the hatred of the body coincide" (215). And while Lester's initial steps on his journey toward depravity are not pornographic in the literal sense of viewing or disseminating published material of a sexual nature, the impulses at work in Lester's voyeurism are no less sadistic than those of the Marquis. They involve, no less than pornography, an inversion of what Cooper refers to as "the relational drama of human arousal and desire [that] presupposes personal and mutually reciprocal intentions on the part of the subjects" (224).

McCarthy begins his account of Lester's voyeuristic adventures by telling readers that "One cold morning on the Frog Mountain turnaround he found a lady sleeping under the trees in a white gown. He watched her for a while to see if she were dead" (41). McCarthy does not tell the reader whether or not Lester wanted her to be dead. In hindsight, however, it seems highly likely that this is the case. What McCarthy does reveal is Lester's ability to approach the woman, even to touch her, only when she is unconscious:

He went closer. He could see her heavy breasts sprawled under the thin stuff of her nightdress and he could see the dark thatch of hair under her belly. He knelt and touched her. Her slack mouth twisted. Her eyes opened. They seemed to open downward by the underlids like a bird's and her eyeballs were gorged with blood. She sat up suddenly, a sweet ferment of whiskey and rot coming off her. Her lip drew back in a cat's snarl. What do you want, you son of a bitch? she said. (41)

As long as the woman is sleeping and silent, Lester draws near to her with awe, even reverence ("He knelt and touched her"). As soon as the flesh becomes

animate, however, Lester loses his capacity to relate, and the encounter quickly becomes one of indifference, and then violence:

Ain't you cold?

What the hell is it to you?

It ain't a damn thing to me.

Ballard had risen and stood above her with the rifle. Where's your clothes at?

She rose up and staggered backwards and sat down hard in the leaves. Then she got up again. She stood there weaving and glaring at him with her puffed and heavylidded eyes. Son of a bitch, she said. Her eyes were casting about. Spying a rock, she lunged and scrabbled it up and stood him off with it.

Ballard's eyes narrowed. You better put down that rock, he said.

You make me.

I said to put it down.

She drew the rock back menacingly. He took a step forward. She heaved the rock and hit him in the chest with it, and then covered her face with her hands. He slapped her so hard it spun her back around facing him. She said: I knowed you'd do me thisaway. (42)

Before leaving, Lester:

took hold of the gown and gave it a good yank. The thin material parted to the waist. She turned loose of her face and grabbed at the

gown....Ballard seized a fistful of the wispy rayon and snatched it.

Her feet came from under her and she sat in the trampled frozen weeds. He folded the garment under his arm and stepped back.

Then he turned and went on down the road. She sat stark naked on the ground and watched him go, calling various names after him, none his. (43)

This episode, according to Nell Sullivan, is more than just a chance encounter that ends badly. Rather, it is indicative of Lester's misogyny that "As long as the woman is sleeping and deanimated, she is 'a lady'. When she awakes she becomes [in Lester's later description of her to police] she becomes 'a whore' (Sullivan 74).

In his encounter with the woman on Frog Mountain, he assaulted his victim first with his eyes, then with "a rock or two" thrown in her direction, finally slapping her when the encounter grew more confrontational. This episode does not put an end to Lester's voyeurism. On the contrary, as the novel progresses, Lester's transgressions intensify. So, too, does the violence that accompanies his acts of voyeurism. He soon begins spying not on sleeping women that he comes upon unexpectedly, but on couples who have gone into the woods to have sex. His constant companion in these activities is his rifle, the ultimate symbol of sex and of death, and of Lester's desire for power over both.²⁴ The novel's second movement opens with Lester's approaching a car idling in the woods, with a couple inside. Upon drawing nearer, Lester realizes that the young man and woman are dead. McCarthy does not account for their deaths (although they seem to have died during the act of sex), and neither does Lester spend much

time wondering about the circumstances. Instead, he sets about taking advantage of the situation. He struggles to move the man to the floor of the automobile, before “kneeling there between the girl’s legs,” he “undid his buckle and lowered his trousers” (88).

As far as the reader is aware, this is Lester’s first act of necrophilia, the moment in which death and eroticism become one for him--not in any natural or life-giving way, but in a way that dishonors both. In this moment, according to Evenson, Lester “does not ask, as most of us would, what is the proper thing that should be done with a dead body, but rather what *can* be done with a dead body” (44). It is thus a moment in which Lester first seeks to transgress his creaturely limitations, and in the breaking of the taboo of necrophilia he leaves behind the “numbingly ordinary world of Sevier county and enters the forbidden realm of the sacred” (Ciuba 78). It is no coincidence that, following his rapacious act, he commits another taboo in robbing the dead, first cleaning out their wallet and purse, then taking a bottle of whiskey from the car’s glovebox. All propriety has given way to Lester’s own desires, which he finally answers by removing the girl’s lifeless body from the car and carrying it home to his cabin (*Child of God* 91).

Once there, Lester takes his violent manipulation of the flesh as object to ritualistic lengths. He stokes a fire, and then inspects the girl’s body carefully, “as if he would see how she were made” (92). He walks outside and looks through the window at her lying naked in front of the fire--an unnecessary, but compulsive act of voyeurism. And of course, he has sex with her, repeatedly. Over the course of a few days, Lester continues to enact his sexual, domestic fantasy with

the dead woman. He dresses her, applies make-up to her, poses her and watches her, all to satisfy the demands not of a reciprocal relationship but rather of his terrible power and the desires that spring from his transcendent isolation. If a priest, within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is an actor within the holy drama of sacrifice, one who utilizes the sacrificial victim--be it sheep or goat, bread or wine--to draw the community closer to its God, then it is not a stretch to see Lester's peculiarities as religious acts. Each one brings his community of one into a more horrific encounter with his divine will-to-power, his ultimate concern for self-transcendence.

Lester's celebration of lust and death builds, as a religious festival, toward a moment of sacrifice. Although the holocaust here is not intentional, McCarthy employs language that evokes imagery of a religious rite:

He covered her with the rags and returned to the fire and built it high as it would go and lay in the bed watching it. The flue howled with the enormity of the draw and red flames danced at the chimney top. An enormous brick candle burning in the night. Ballard crammed brush and pieces of stumpwood right up the chimney throat. He made coffee and leaned back on his pallet. Now freeze, you son of a bitch, he told the night beyond the windowpane. (92)

Later in the night, "he got up again and lit the lamp and went into the other room. He turned the girl over and tied the rope around her and ascended into the attic. Again she rose, now naked" (103). Although McCarthy employs the active voice ("Again she rose") when describing the girl's movements, as though she possessed the will or the freedom to move, she is very much object here, rather

than subject. Bound like a sacrificial victim, she is an offering freely taken, rather than one freely given. The fires consume her completely, so that Lester finds “not so much as a bone. It was as if she’d never been.” The destruction of her flesh is complete.

Having destroyed his ‘playpretty’ and descended into the caves beneath Sevier County, but still possessing an intense desire to manipulate the flesh of others for his own purposes, Lester must procure another body. He begins to kill his victims himself, using his ever-present rifle. The first such victim is a young woman he knows, whom he has visited before and with whom he even seems to have something of a friendly relationship--at least to the extent that she is willing to let him into her home. Once inside, however, Lester makes it evident that he sees the woman primarily as a body that exists for his pleasure:

How come you wear them britches?

What’s it to you?

Ballard’s mouth was dry. You cain’t see nothin, he said.

She looked at him blankly, then she reddened. I ain’t got nothin for you to see, she said.

Ballard took a few wooden steps toward the sofa and then stopped in the middle of the floor. Why don’t you show me them nice titties, he said hoarsely. (117-118)

When the girl refuses to give in to his request Lester pretends to leave, but once outside he shoots her through the window. Then he sets the house on fire, lifts the girl to his shoulders, and leaves the girl’s younger brother, “an idiot child,” to perish in the flames (119-120). McCarthy narrates all of this, Lester’s first murder,

in such a way that the necrophiliac's cold and destructive power is on full display.

As the second part of the novel draws to a close, McCarthy continues to depict Lester as a man who possesses--or imagines himself to possess--godlike powers. He crouches with his rifle between his knees and commands the snow to fall faster and it does (139). A page later, McCarthy reveals that Lester had "long been wearing the underclothes of his female victims but now he took to appearing in their outerwear as well. A gothic doll in illfit clothes, its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape" (140). At this point it seems that Lester's transformation from Child of God to High Priest of his devotion to his own brutal godling self is complete. As Ciuba states:

By the end of the novel, Ballard embodies the violence of the sacred so completely that he is hardly recognized as human...Although such crossdressing flaunts the trophies of his bloodshed, it points beyond the obvious physical outrages to a violation committed out of metaphysical desire. Having sought the ultimacy that may come from being like the other, Ballard now seeks to be the Other, to seize the very identity of his victims. Like ceremonial masks that bled weird combinations of color and forms, Ballard's costume attests to the confusion and loss of difference caused by violence...Wandering the hills in a dress and frightwig, Ballard is garbed in the very fury of the godhead...(80)

Finally, throughout the novel's third act, Lester's predations increase and his arrogance only grows. Even as he journeys toward his end, his actions are marked by an air of invincibility; with his rifle in his hand, he is able to consume

the flesh of others, bound only by the law of his own twisted desires. When he approaches a pick-up truck and throws the door open, catching a young man and woman in the yellow beam of his flashlight as if it were some eye of divine judgment, the enormity of the moment throws Lester off-balance, but only momentarily: "Ballard's head was numb. They seemed assembled there the three of them for some purpose other than his" (149). However, the boy's rebuke, "You ain't the law" (149), rouses Lester back to the purpose that was always his: to set himself above others in order to destroy them. "You was fixin to screw, wasn't ye?" he asks the couple, before shooting the young man in the neck (150). At this, significantly, the young woman folds her hands--as though in prayer, perhaps--and pleads with Lester. "Oh no," and later, "Oh God" (150). He shoots the girl next, in a passage that Nell Sullivan has used to illustrate the contempt that Lester feels at womanly, fleshy abjection: "Lester's ladies leak because they experience the violent rupture of bodily integrity at his hands....what disgusts Lester is the fact that she wets herself" (75). To the reader--as to Lester--there is in this very messy moment no beauty, and certainly no sanctity; there is only abject ugliness and depraved violence.

This episode is the beginning of Lester's downward spiral toward the moment when his desires begin to undo his own existence. In fact, from this moment, the novel presents something like a transfer of power. In McCarthy's telling, it is as though Lester is losing control of the enormous power that he craved, but which now threatens to consume him. Lust, which had provided the impetus for his predation of others, now manifests itself in sloppy and uncontrollable impulses. As Lester drags this victim's body through the weeds,

“Her head was lolling and blood ran down her neck and Ballard had dragged her out of her shoes. He was breathing harshly and his eyeballs were wild and white” (151). Unable to keep himself from raping her then and there, “He laid her down in the woods not fifty feet from the road and threw himself on her, kissing the still warm mouth and feeling under her clothes” (151).

In his desire, Lester has become careless, a slave to the impulses which he had wielded over others. The sound of the truck’s engine starting up and driving away brings him to his senses, but also serves as a harbinger of the fact that he is about to become the prey. The community begins to hunt him just as he has hunted young men and women for months. As the consequences of his deeds begin to close in on him, even Lester’s prayers--once powerful enough (in his mind) to command the snow--lose their force. When Lester wades into a creek and finds it rising around him he mutters “a vitriolic invocation for the receding of the water” (155) to no avail. Later, having nearly drowned, he crouches in his subterranean home, “soaking his feet and gibbering, a sound not quite crying that echoed from the walls of the grotto like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes” (159). If this muttering in the grotto is some form of glossolalia, it is heard and answered by no one. Lester’s connection to whatever dark power sustained him for the duration of his predatory movements has been severed. Lester, the one who preyed on the vulnerabilities of others, is now made vulnerable.

This powerlessness is most clearly expressed later in the novel when Lester--following a failed attempt on the life of John Greer in which Lester himself is shot--awakes in a hospital bed, “in a thin white gown in a thin white room, false

acolyte or antiseptic felon, a practitioner of ghastliness, a part-time ghoul," to discover that he is missing an arm:

He wondered what they'd done with his arm and decided to ask. When the nurse came with his supper he said: What'd they do with my arm?

She swung the tabletop and set the tray on it. You got it shot off, she said.

I know that. I just wanted to know what all they done with it.

I don't know.

It don't make a damn to you, does it?

No. (175-176)

Thus, Lester sees in his own body the estrangement from flesh that has shaped his every action throughout the novel. It was an estrangement that had been with him from very early on, at least from the day when he watched as his father's body was cut down from the barn rafters like meat. And if he sought to overcome this estrangement, it was not through reconciliation with the fleshly part of himself or of others, but rather through transcending his own creatureliness by preying on the flesh of those weaker than he. And now that he finds himself in a state of such weakness--he cannot button his shirt, much less shoot his rifle (180)--he fails even to elicit the compassion of his nurse.

When Lester dies, a few years later, in a state hospital for the criminally insane, his body is shipped to the state medical school in Memphis, where it becomes an object, albeit an object of study:

There in a basement room he was preserved with formalin and

wheeled forth to take his place with other deceased persons newly arrived. He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from the bones. His heart was taken out. (194)

Yet even this scientific (and poetically just) process does not unfold without some measure of reverence:

His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. (194)²⁵

The novel ends with the discovery, in the caves that Lester frequented, of seven female victims, which had “suffered every indignity a human body can” (Sullivan 74). Yet there is more indignity in store for these corpses. The sheriff and his two deputies, accompanied by two other men, wrap the women “like enormous hams” in “muslin shrouds on which was stenciled Property of the State of Tennessee” (196). And so the novel has come full circle, from the moment when the lifeless body of Lester’s father was described as meat to one in which his victims are seen not just as meat but also as property. Lester Ballard grew up out of a community, and was shaped by a community, with little reverence for the flesh. He became, for a mercifully brief tenure, the self-appointed priest and the

self-exalted deity of a ritualistic obsession, in which vulnerable flesh was manipulated and destroyed. Finally, in his death, his victims continue to bear the indignity of abjection, at the hands of the community. If McCarthy wishes to hold up a mirror to humanity's worst impulses, Lester Ballard and his community certainly reflect the excesses that can--and do--arise from fleshly estrangements, and from the desire to become *sicut deus* in the ways that some humans treat vulnerable flesh.

CONCLUSION

The spiritual vocation of the priest is one in which the flesh is understood not as a limitation to be despised, but rather as a context in which sacredness can be encountered and in which the fleshly human can be sanctified. As such, this vocation is concerned with the significance of fleshly realities in the human life, including such events as birth, death, and the expression of the erotic or sexual. The priest is able to recognize in such moments not only beauty but holiness. He or she is able to encounter within these moments, and to help others encounter, some glimpse of the grace that is evidence of God's work in this world. The characters of Wendell Berry, especially Jack Beechum and Mat Feltner, serve this purpose among their friends, family, and fellow citizens, and as such, assist in the construction and cultivation of the kind of community in which fleshly realities are celebrated. In contrast, Cormac McCarthy's character Lester Ballard, himself the product of a community that embodies problematic responses to the flesh, is defined by twin impulses of shame and predatory obsession when it comes to the human body. If death and the erotic are joined in his imagination and in his actions, what binds them together is not a common

sacredness, but rather Lester's destructive lust, and his frustrated desire to possess the flesh of others completely, so that rather than pointing to the grace that might be at work in the world and in human life, Lester's existence exaggerates the estrangements that cut him off not only from his own flesh but also from the flesh of others. Such characters, and the fictional worlds they inhabit, thus provide for readers opposing glimpses of either the good or the evil that is possible when one embraces or denies the capacity for sacredness within fleshly existence.

CHAPTER 5

THE PROPHETIC IN WENDELL BERRY'S FICTION

The prophet is one who understands community life as a context of the sacred. Rather than seeking to transcend the obligations placed upon him by virtue of relationships with others, the prophet seeks to embody a vocation of responsibility to others and of justice among others. He will do so by holding a community accountable, and also by serving as a voice for those who might otherwise be ignored. In both the biblical sense, as manifest in figures like Jeremiah, Amos, and John the Baptist--and the historical sense, in which one might refer to Martin Luther King, Jr. or Sojourner Truth as prophetic figures, it is obvious that this is not, as sometimes misconstrued, a vocation solely concerned with telling the future. Rather, a prophet is often one who tells the stories of the past--as examples of justice and faithfulness for the present--in order to point toward what is possible in a hope-filled and hope-oriented future. Prophetic speech is not to be cryptic, according to Heschel, but powerfully concrete and thus concretely persuasive. In order to fulfill this vocation, then, the most significant capacity one must have is not clairvoyance but rather wisdom: the sort of wisdom that allows one to be a hopeful steward of both language and law, encouraging a right use of both words and actions. In this way a vision of the good might be adequately and persuasively communicated to a group of people.

In his life and in his work, these have been important principles for

Wendell Berry. These commitments are present in his writings on matters of politics, economics and citizenship, as well as in his writings on literature. In the collection *Standing By Words*, for example, Berry admonishes readers to be careful and faithful communicators; he demands both excellence and integrity from readers and writers--especially himself--in the way that they use words. In short, he sees human communication as a context in which justice must necessarily be rigorously observed. Without such care, language, communication, and the communities that result are shallow at best and destructive at worst. When human beings adhere to high standards in the ways they speak, and in the ways they seek justice, then communities can become contexts not just of the good, but also of the sacred.

These principles can also be found in Berry's fiction, in the lives of a number of his characters. From the publication of his earliest novels, *Nathan Coulter* and *A Place on Earth*, it has been evident that the citizens of Berry's fictional world--affectionately called the Port William Membership--are men and women who adhere rigorously to the demands of communal life. They take seriously the challenges and the responsibilities placed upon them within the context of their common life and their common labor. Integral to this task, as Brent Laytham has pointed out, is a reverence for examples and stories of past righteousness, models of neighborly concern and just living handed down by their forebears (174). These stories encourage those in the membership not only to look out for one another in the present, but also to work together toward a healthy and sustainable future. In doing so, they make their community a context not just of tolerance but one of righteousness. In short, Port William, as

presented in Berry's stories and novels, is a prophetic community.

Even within this community of prophets, however, three men are especially significant for the ways that they embody Heschel's idea that "prophetic inspiration is for the sake, for benefit, of a third party. It is not a private affair between prophet and God; its purpose is the illumination of the people rather than the illumination of the prophet" (202). And as Heschel says later,

Prophecy is not a private affair of the experient. The prophet is not concerned with his personal salvation, and the background of his experiences is the life of the people. The aim is not personal illumination, but the illumination of a people; not spiritual self-enhancement, but a mission to lead the people to the service of God. The prophet is nothing without his people. (362)

These three characters, were they simply to follow the model provided by the dominant culture, the model of using one's talents and opportunities in order to escape one's community (particularly if that community is a small town), could very easily have made lives for themselves that fit any number of definitions of success. However, there is something in them, some deep-rooted sense of vocation and of faithfulness to a people and a place, that anchors them to Port William. It is their choice to stay in Port William. They make this choice because, on some level, they recognize that they are nothing without their community, and they also recognize that their community will be stronger if they remain a part of it. They also recognize that by being a part of this community, however small and insignificant it might seem to the outside world, they are also a part of something much bigger: something important, enduring, and holy.

These men, fittingly, are a father and his two sons: Wheeler, Henry, and Andy Catlett. Each of these men--uniquely among Berry's characters--has received formal, university training in a profession. Wheeler and Henry are lawyers and Andy is a journalist. Each has learned, in an academic context, the skills, the rules, and above all the language that allows him to practice his career. But perhaps more significant to their fulfillment of the prophetic vocation is the decision to use their skills and talents not for their own sake, or in service to those wealthy and powerful entities that are always seeking to co-opt the charisms of the prophet, but rather in service to their community--the overlooked town of Port William, and the small farmers who reside there.

It has often been noted that Andy Catlett is the most autobiographical of Berry's characters. This is evident not only in the stories in which Andy figures prominently, but also in the way that Berry presents Andy's father, Wheeler, who, in both demeanor and occupation, was almost certainly modeled after Berry's father John (Goodrich 105). Wheeler, like John Berry, is a lawyer. And Berry's depiction of this character not only affords the writer an opportunity to reflect on his experiences as the son of a country attorney but also to show what a faithful commitment to that occupation might look like. Richard P. Church, a farmer, a lawyer, and an avid reader of Berry, takes this possibility in a theological direction:

In his descriptions of Wheeler Catlett, the lawyer for the Port William membership, Berry offers a vision of the good work that Christians who are lawyers might do, the types of communities necessary to sustain Christians in the law, and the limits that

Christians who work as lawyers must ultimately place on the law.

(50)

Thus, Church makes room for a reading of Wheeler as a man who understands his chosen profession as more than a job, but more appropriately as a vocation, a high calling that has profound implications not only for Wheeler alone, but for the entire community of Port William and ultimately for the world in which that community lives. In one of the later stories about Wheeler, *The Wild Birds*, Berry presents a picture of the attorney, now sixty-seven years old, looking back on his career and on what his work has meant to him, not just professionally but in terms of his humanity:

In loyalty to his clients, or to their maker, in whose image he has supposed them made, he has believed in their generosity, goodness, courage, and intelligence. Mere fact has never been enough for him. He has pled and reasoned, cajoled, bullied, and preached, pushing events always toward a better end than he knew they could reach, resisting always the disappointment that he knew he should expect...(339)

Wheeler is presented here as one who believes in a hopeful future not because he despises the present or the past but because he treasures them. He believes in the possibility of a healthy world not because he hates what he sees in the present one, but because he loves what he sees in those who make up his community and his world. Moreover, he has fought with all his strength to communicate this vision, difficult as it might be, to his community, that he might urge them on toward a fulfillment of this possibility. This is the work of the

prophet, and it has been Wheeler's work from the earliest days of his practice of law.

While readers of Berry are offered glimpses of this character in Berry's first two novels, it is in Berry's third longer work, *The Memory of Old Jack*, and in subsequent short stories, that Berry first invites readers to understand Wheeler's point of view, including his thoughts on why he does the work that he does, and his perspective on the role that he plays in the community. The scene in which Berry places these reflections is set in the hours after Jack's funeral. Wheeler has told his wife Bess that he has an errand to run, but more than the errand, understandably, occupies his thoughts. He recognizes, like several of the citizens--particularly the men--of Port William, that Jack's death has marked "one of the crucial divisions in his own life" (162). Within the context of this afternoon, Berry reveals the shape and the burden of Wheeler's vocation:

For nearly thirty years Wheeler has been involved in the founding and the administration and the defense of a marketing cooperative whose purpose is to assure a decent living, a chance to survive on their land, to the farmers of this part of the country. It is a Jeffersonian vision, one might say, that the cooperative was founded to implement and preserve, but in Wheeler the effort was founded also upon an impulse sterner and more personal: as a boy he had seen his father and his neighbors sell their crops for too little to pay the warehouse commission; he had seen the time when the market was a tragedy in which good men saw their ruin. With a child's clear sense of justice he determined then to do something

about it if he could. And in considerable measure he and his friends in the cooperative have so far succeeded in doing something about it. (162-163)

There is not much poetic in this brief passage; with its descriptions of market conditions and cooperative intentions, it is a prosaic, straightforward piece of exposition. But it reveals a number of significant things, about both Wheeler's vision and Berry's. First, readers learn of Wheeler's commitment to the law not just as a career but as a context for justice. In other words, Wheeler has chosen, from the very beginning (even from childhood) to develop the skills and training necessary to serve the small farmers that make up the population of the region that Wheeler calls home. Wheeler's work at establishing and defending the cooperative, while clearly not the only tasks he does as an attorney, are among the most important.

Readers also learn something of Wheeler's motivations in establishing and sustaining this kind of work. On the one hand, the impetus is a philosophical one, inspired by the visionary thought of another Southern lawyer, Thomas Jefferson, who believed in and defended the notion of the yeoman farmer so fervently that it assumes the status of a religious icon in his vision of America. But the reader is mistaken to assume that any purely philosophical idea, however grand, would be enough--either for Wheeler or for Berry--to motivate the prophet to take up his vocation as a voice for his community. Just as Berry's own social advocacy, which some have labeled as his prophetic work, has emerged in the last several decades out of his committed love for a specific place and a located

community, so Wheeler's vocation is also intensely personal. His commitment to justice, and his willingness to live out that commitment, cannot be abstracted from the concrete, historical, and communal experiences that have defined his life. Specifically, Wheeler carries with him memories of a time, as distant and as recent as his own childhood, when good men, hardworking farmers, including his own father, suffered ruin because as individuals they were unable to stand in the presence of entities and events much larger and much more powerful than they. Even as a child, Berry implies, Wheeler seemed to understand that justice could only be fully realized in community, and that community needed a voice. And so he committed himself to assisting his community, Port William, in whatever way he could.

As one who embodies the prophetic vocation within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Wheeler is a man of the law; but in the manner of the truly prophetic, his relationship to the law can never be abstract. The law is never just the law for the prophet, but must be rooted in something more substantial. As Heschel notes, "The fact that filled the prophets with dismay was not the absence of adequate laws, but the absence of righteousness. Judges were active in the land, but their judgments were devoid of righteousness" (202). Throughout the writings of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law, while certainly important--this was, after all, the Mosaic community they were addressing--was also necessarily perceived as part of a triad, together with the community and the land. For those prophets, the law could never be seen as abstract, just as religion could never be seen as abstract. If both law and religion are at work among a community living in the land, caring for that land and for one another, and if both are directed

toward justice, then they are living realities. If either or both are divorced from the community or the land, or if either or both are co-opted for unjust ends, then they are dead realities.

These are principles that seem to be at work in the career of Wheeler Catlett. As Janet Goodrich describes the character, he is “the site of collisions between the humanly conceived legal system and the moral dimensions it exists to navigate” (104).²⁶ He is thus a sort of liminal figure, one who has to wrestle with the ambiguities of the law in light of a demanding standard of communal justice. His liminal status is one that manifests itself not just in relation to the law, but also in relation to space and time as well. And this wrestling, and this liminality, are not without their costs. Berry describes the cost most acutely exacted in Wheeler’s life in *The Memory of Old Jack*: “But the complexity of Wheeler’s history has been that in order to serve and defend the way of life that he loves and respects above all others, he has had to leave it to live another kind of life, first in college and law school and then in the courthouse town of Hargrave” (163).

This is the liminality of space that Wheeler enters, and which takes a toll on a man so committed to a specific place. As Heschel has noted, the prophet, paradoxically, often lives apart from or is even ostracized by the community because of the work that he does, even though that work is enacted on behalf of that community. This is the type of existence that Wheeler endures. It is fitting that the scene on the afternoon of Jack’s funeral takes place in the front seat of Wheeler’s car. This is a location in which the reader often finds Wheeler; many of the scenes involving the lawyer in the novel *A Place on Earth* are automobile

scenes, in which Wheeler is depicted commuting back and forth from Port William to Hargrave, where he lives and works, or even to Frankfort, where he sometimes goes to argue a case.²⁷

Wheeler is not the only such traveler in Berry's fictional universe. There are the transient preachers, always on their way to some bigger and more lucrative ministry; there are the Clara Pettits who leave the life of Port William behind and only return for periodic visits, becoming less connected to the place with each passing year; and there are even comically rendered figures like Lightning and Smoothbore Berlew, who live for the weekends when they can hop in their rusty automobile and chase amusements of various kinds in Hargrave or some other larger town. But among these travelers and commuters, Wheeler alone views his traveling as a necessary burden to bear for the sake of the place he loves. His time at the university and law school and his practice in Hargrave are endured for the sake of the community. Unlike other, less capable men and women in Berry's fictional world, Wheeler understands his gifts, his training, and his career not as tickets out of small-town life but as ways of ensuring its survival.

Yet even as Wheeler feels the pang that comes with his detachment, he also recognizes the necessity--in both his life and his work--of remaining rooted, not just emotionally or "spiritually" but also physically, in the life of Port William. In a manner integral to the prophetic vocation, Wheeler has been deliberate in staying close to that which he defends. He has not, by virtue of his education or his job in town, transcended the community from which he came. He remains close to the people and the places that define the community, so that his commitments to them do not gradually fade into the background of his life,

replaced or overwhelmed by other, more pressing obligations. For Wheeler there is nothing more pressing or more important than the small farms and the everyday farmers of Port William. It would be impossible for him to serve justice, as an abstract concept, without also serving the community. As Heschel says, "The prophet is nothing without his people," and Wheeler's work is nothing if he does not remain close to the people he serves. And so he stays close to the place on earth that will always be his home community; he involves himself regularly with the life of Port William, even as he argues their cause within a larger arena.

Wheeler's liminality is also illustrated in his relationship to time. In a later short story entitled "It Wasn't Me," Berry describes Wheeler as "a seer of visions--not the heavenly visions of saints and mystics, but the earthly ones of a mainly practical man who sees the good that is possible in the world and, beyond that, the good that is desirable in it" (271). As Berry asserts, these visions that Wheeler sees--his prophetic imagination as it were--are remarkable not for their otherworldliness, not for the way in which they lift him out of his context, but for the way they afford him a different perspective on that context. Thus, they involve the future, in the sense that Wheeler concerns himself with and works for the next generation of farmers, but these visions are also unmistakably grounded in the past and come to bear significantly on the community's present engagement with matters of justice and righteousness. As the passage near the end of *The Memory of Old Jack* continues, Wheeler reflects on the passage of time; he perceives past, present, and future as a unity, and he perceives the people who inhabit that unity of time as a community in space, as only a prophet really can:

Now Old Jack, who was the last of that generation that Wheeler looked to with such filial devotion, is dead. And Wheeler is fifty-two years old, as old as the century, and younger men are looking to him. Now he must cease to be a son to the old men and become a father to the young. He has his own sons, of course. But there are also the young men of the farms, coming on, men such as Elton Penn and Nathan Coulter, in whom the old way has survived. Wheeler has been thinking about them and about the troubles that probably lie ahead of them: an increasing scarcity of labor as more and more of the country people move to the cities; the consequent necessity for further mechanization of the farms; the consequent need of the farmers for more land and more capital in order to survive; the consequent further departure of the labor force from the country; the increasing difficulty of preserving an agricultural economy favorable to small farmers as political power flows from the country to the cities. These interlinking chains of consequence have lain heavily upon Wheeler's mind for years. But Old Jack's death has raised anew and more starkly than ever the possibility that men of his kind are a race doomed to extinction, that the men Wheeler loves most in the world are last survivors.

Driving out the Birds Branch Road this afternoon, he sees the farms and their fences and fields and buildings as never before in the light and shadow of a human history that had its beginning in time, and will have its end. His eyes lingering familiarly over the lay

of the fields in the brilliant fall sunlight, he muses upon the mortality
not of individual men and women but of the human life on the earth.
(163-164)

Wheeler is blessed with a level of insight, a perception that allows him to discern connections and causes and consequences, to see the bigger picture among the particularities of life's unfolding. And he desires to apply this wisdom toward imagining a future that, while it might not be likely, is at least possible. Wheeler's understanding of how the past shapes the present and how present actions point toward the future not only compels him to treasure the stories and examples of the past, but also to be an advocate for future generations of Port William farmers. This is represented most significantly in the way that Wheeler's commitment to Jack Beechum parallels his commitment to Elton Penn. It is in the short story "It Wasn't Me" that Wheeler's relationship to Elton and his work on behalf of Jack's legacy most clearly converge within the context of Wheeler's prophetic vocation.

The story can most concisely be described, as Richard Church does, as "the story of a failed will" (51). The will in question is that of Jack Beechum. The reality in the story that presents the greatest threat to the validity of that will is a scrap of paper. On the paper, Jack had expressed to his attorney Wheeler both his desire concerning his farm and also the price he wished to set for its sale:

Wheeler see the
boy has his place
200 \$ an acre be
about right she

ought to not
complain Wheeler
see to it. (268)

The significance of the note is understood by Wheeler as it could be by no one else, as are the difficulties involved in interpreting it:

The slow, crooked legend of that page fell upon Wheeler's conscience with a palpable gravity, as if the old man had reached out from beyond the grave and laid a hand on him. The letter, of course, was of no legal worth whatsoever. In the eyes of a court it would answer no pertinent question. Who was "the boy"? What was "this place"? Who was "she"? Who was "Wheeler"? Who, for that matter, wrote the letter? But Wheeler, had he been the one to be held, would have been held tighter by that letter, that outcry, than by the will itself. (268)

Here, Wheeler's liminal status is once more on display. Because he is a lawyer, he cannot deny the inscrutable quality of the note, the inevitable questions it elicits. Because he is a friend, a member in community and in communion with the deceased and with those still living, he cannot deny the note's awful clarity. He cannot escape or transcend the obligation it places upon him. Most significantly, Wheeler is a man who refuses to engage in the convenient dualisms that would make his life and his work far easier, but ultimately less faithful. Instead, Wheeler chooses to confront the limitations placed upon his visions by the world in which he lives; he chooses to wrestle with the obstacles that set themselves before the kingdom and the economy for which

he advocates. He is wise enough to understand both the stakes and the obstacles involved in doing so--the implications both for him and for those he represents. But he is idealistic enough, and righteous enough, to understand that even if he stands alone, and even if he believes alone, he must stand, and he must believe, that the vision he has of the good that is possible is not a vain or futile one.

Driving the action of "It Wasn't Me" is the question of whether a will--a legal document--can adequately (or in this case, accurately) convey something as deep and complex as the wishes of the deceased. While most would readily acknowledge that it cannot, it takes a prophet, one gifted with the vision to see and to understand the significance of community, and to value what it is that brings human beings together and what holds them together, to understand why a document like a will must be read and interpreted with humility and with reverence.

Church points to a significant passage in the story in which Berry writes that Jack Beechum was "Wheeler's client, his kinsman by marriage, and his friend" to demonstrate how Wheeler's lawyerly duties, in this story and in others, most often grow out of friendship, which "is built around a shared life together in community, which itself is built around a shared vision of the good practice of farming" (51). Thus, Wheeler's work, even his devotion, toward the faithful execution of Jack's will comes from someplace far more substantial than his education in the principles and precedents of "The Law" as abstractly understood. Indeed, as Church writes later in the essay, "Wheeler has no obligation to abstractions such as the law..." (57). Using Church's statements as

a starting point, I would argue that the relationship between the primary characters in this story--Wheeler, Elton, and the recently deceased Jack Beechum--and their shared relationship to Jack's farm, plays out within a context not just of law but of something that more resembles covenant. The obligation that binds Wheeler to this case and to the people involved goes far beyond any business agreement or even any friendship that he once shared with Jack. It stretches beyond the friendship and the admiration that he now has for Elton. There is something solemn at work here. The law may be a part of this covenant, but it does not represent the whole of the covenant. Wheeler acts in this story in response to a higher standard, a sort of righteousness to which the land and the law both hold him because of concrete and binding commitments he has entered into over the course of his career and his life.

Within this story, Wheeler is presented as a prophetic figure not only in the way that he navigates between two competing visions--two kingdoms or economies²⁸--but also in the way that he schools Elton in the disciplines of hope and of communal obligation, teaching the young, stubborn farmer the capacity for sacredness that is to be found in human beings' relationships to one another. The first kingdom presented in the story is the one represented by Clara Pettit and her husband Gladston. Clara Pettit is Jack Beechum's daughter, his only child and legal heir. Her husband, Gladston, is a Louisville banker. The second kingdom is represented by Wheeler, and by those whose "rights" and interests he seeks to protect. The former is a kingdom and an economy of the bottom line. The latter is a kingdom rooted firmly in friendship, with an economy that depends on the significance of the gift. The former is a kingdom that rests on "law" with an

economy of monetary value. The latter is a kingdom of justice, with an economy of true worth. The debate between these two kingdoms centers on that scrap of paper, which Jack had chosen to keep in the pocket of his overalls.

As his part in this debate, Wheeler takes upon himself the prophetic task, outlined by Walter Brueggemann in *The Prophetic Imagination*, of both pronouncing judgment against injustice, speaking truth to the power structures that threaten to overwhelm the community, and at the same time inspiring hope that the good, the just, the righteous will overcome those forces that conspire against them (14). When Wheeler confronts Clara and Gladston with the note, he does so in hope that they will understand its gravity in the same way that he does. He seems genuinely to believe that they might acknowledge its claim upon them; that they might approach the settling of Old Jack's estate not entirely from the perspective of the bottom line, but that they might make room for a higher righteousness in the way they conduct this business. Nonetheless, his hope is disappointed by the conversation that passes between them:

He had done his assuming, as he often did, in a world that he assumed was ruled by instinctive decency. That Clara and Glad Pettit did not inhabit that particular world, they let him know fast. After the reading of Old Jack's will, Wheeler asked them to remain in his office to speak privately with him. He thereupon showed them the letter in the notebook, explained what it meant, and suggested that they proceed with the sale of the farm to Mary and Elton at the stipulated price.

Clara quickly glanced at her husband in a way that alone

ought to have informed Wheeler that he had driven his ducks to the wrong pond.

“No,” Glad Pettit said.

And then Clara herself said, “No.”

That was not a reply calculated to please Wheeler, and it certainly did not. It surprised him too.”

After a few moments, Wheeler speaks:

“Surely you can’t feel that you’re being deceived. The letter there in the notebook--no court would honor it, of course, but among us there can be no doubt.”

“I have no doubt.”

“And this is a most deserving young couple. I don’t have to tell you how well and honorably they’ve taken care of the place, and how kindly and hospitably they’ve treated your father.”

Seeing the embarrassment that Wheeler intended for Clara, Gladston Pettit stepped in. “Wheeler, you as a lawyer and I as a banker know that this is purely a matter of law--of principle, I would say....”

And later, Gladston concludes, “All Clara is asking for, Wheeler, is what is rightly hers. She has the right to fair market value for her property” (269-270).

Wheeler knows that the argument, as long as it proceeds on the terms set by Glad and Clara, the only terms understandable to the kingdoms and the economies in which they operate, will go nowhere. He attempts one more time to redirect the conversation toward that different perspective, to locate the argument

within that different economical framework to which he has committed his life and his work:

“It’s not a question of what was owed and what was paid, Clara. That wasn’t what Uncle Jack had on his mind. There were other questions that he put ahead of that one. What would be best for this good pair of young people? What would be the best for this good farm? What should be done here for the good of the world?--Uncle Jack would have put it that way, and I hope you don’t mind if I do. He thought it over a lot of times, and he concluded that the best thing would be to put the good people and the good farm together--to bind their fates together, so to speak. I know he thought about it that way. I heard him talk about it that way. It’s not an old man’s senile foolishness. He knew what he was doing.” He paused, looking at Clara, and then he said, “Clara, I don’t know anybody more worthy to walk in your daddy’s tracks than Elton Penn. And your daddy loved him.”

And that failed too, for Clara said, “My father’s loves are not mine” (270). Like the biblical prophets, Wheeler roots his argument, his claim for righteousness, in the past. He speaks of the wisdom of Clara’s father, and of men like him, who had entered into a binding agreement (a covenant) with the land and with the community, to do what was best for it. He calls upon Clara’s sympathies; he entreats her to have ears to hear what he is saying, to take note of what the righteousness of men like her father would call for in this situation. But she is deaf to his claims. His pleas for justice go unheeded. Wheeler has

nothing more to say to Clara and Gladston, and they are likewise silent toward him.

Having spoken the truth to the Pettits, challenging them unsuccessfully to embrace the perspective that governs not only Wheeler's actions, but which also governed Jack's, Wheeler next turns to the second task of the prophet. As it is incumbent upon the prophet to speak words of possibility and hope to a downtrodden community, so it becomes Wheeler's obligation to challenge Elton to hope for what the young farmer believes is not just unlikely but impossible. It is evident that Wheeler must use his gifts--in language, in the law, in persuasion--to inspire Elton to believe that what is right, and what is just, will come to pass. This is not a burden that Wheeler bears easily, but neither is it one that he can escape:

It was not a problem appointed to him, but one that he inherited, a part of his own legacy from his deceased client and friend. Jack Beechum came back to haunt him, and often in the small hours of the night Wheeler would find himself talking and arguing with the old man face-to-face. Trying to end these encounters, he would cry out in his thoughts: 'But I *did* try! I can't, damn it, *make* 'em do it!' And then he would think, no longer arguing but only mourning, that the Pettits were playing a different game from any that Old Jack had ever played, and living in a different world from the one that he had lived in. The letter in the notebook was written in a language the Pettits did not speak; they had forgot the tongue in which an old man might cry out from his grave in love and in defense of a

possibility no longer his own in this world. (271)

But if Wheeler cannot make the Pettits speak this language of possibility, he must make Elton believe that what it says is true. And so gradually, as the day of the sale draws near, Wheeler impresses his own hope upon Elton. Both the lawyer and the young farmer know that it will not be easy to purchase the farm. Both know that it will involve no small amount of risk. Both know that it would be much safer and much more secure simply to let the farm go to those with more money, those who see the land as a financial investment but as little else. But both also know that their investment in the land is more significant and more substantial than any business interest. Both know that surrendering the Beechum farm involves more than simply giving up a piece of land. It is akin to turning their back on a sacred trust. And so Wheeler, compelled by the memory of Jack Beechum, and Elton, compelled by the righteous hope exhibited by Wheeler, join together to secure the land at auction for the man Jack Beechum intended should have it.

This obedience to Jack's wishes does not come cheaply. When the auction ends, Elton has sacrificed some measure of financial security in order to acquire the land that he knows and loves, the land that Old Jack had known and loved. More than that, he has obligated himself to others--for that is what debt is. By virtue of his hard upbringing and his desire to make his own way in the world, Elton hates to be obligated to others. And here, another task is presented to Wheeler. Having urged Elton to put his security on the line, to sacrifice something of his own peace of mind for what was right, Wheeler understands that the burden cannot be Elton's alone. He withdraws \$1,000 of his own money and

transfers it to a savings account in the name of Beechum, Catlett, and Penn. It is a small gesture, in some ways; in other ways, it is enormous. The sum of a thousand dollars will not break Wheeler, but neither is it easily given. More significantly, it binds Wheeler to this community of the living and the dead in a way that costs him something. Wheeler is under no legal obligation to share in Elton's debt. He simply gave advice that Elton followed. Yet if the law does not require Wheeler's course of action, justice certainly does. Furthermore, Wheeler knows that concepts like community and justice, faithfulness and righteousness, and even the law, are nothing unless they are put into action. He knows that he cannot abstract himself from the practice of the kind of justice he advocates, but must concretely and sacrificially commit himself to living it out.

Finally, there rests with Wheeler what is perhaps the most difficult task of all: the work of persuading Elton not only to receive the gift that has been given, but to acknowledge it as a gift. As noted above, Elton is a man whose life circumstances have made him uneasy about entering into binding agreements with others. He is a man who, in many ways, has sought to live outside of community, and been unwilling to admit that he needs the support and encouragement, even the help of others, if he is going to survive. So when he arrives at Wheeler's office shortly after purchasing the Beechum place, Wheeler knows that the conversation will be a difficult one. Speaking of the farm, Elton confesses his fear that he might lose it. Wheeler replies: "No, my boy. You're not going to lose it. Not if we *both* can help it. I told you to go ahead because it would be all right. You must understand that I meant that. If you need help, I'm going to help you." But Elton is reluctant to accept the kind of help that Wheeler is

offering: "But damn it Wheeler, don't you think I *ought* to lose it if I can't make it on my own?" (281). What Wheeler immediately recognizes, what Elton cannot yet understand, is that the young farmer is speaking in the language of that kingdom against which the two of them had just stood their ground. It is the economy of the bottom line that resists help; it is the economy of grace, of the gift, that Wheeler advocates. And he realizes the importance of helping Elton to see things in that way as well, not just for Elton, and not just for himself, but for the community of which they are a part, the community that began with those who came before, and which will continue, they hope, long after they are gone:

Wheeler sits and looks at Elton while Elton sits and looks at the palm of his right hand, oppressed between gratitude and resentment. Watching him struggle, Wheeler realizes again the fatality of what he has undertaken. He has started something he will have to finish. And how long will that be?

The office has faded away around them. They might as well be in a barn or in an open field. They are meeting in the world, Wheeler thinks, striving to determine how they will continue in it. Both of them are still wearing their hats and coats.

"People have been exercising those rights here for a hundred and seventy-five years or so," he says finally, "and in general they've wasted more than they've saved. One of the rights the figures gives is the right to ruin."

"You're talking about something you learned out of a book, Wheeler."

"I'm talking about something I learned from Jack Beechum, among others, and something you'll learn too, if you stay put and pay attention, whether I tell it to you or not."

"Do you know what I want, Wheeler?"

"I expect I do. But tell me."

"I want to make it my own. I don't want a soul to thank."

Wheeler thinks, "Too late," but he does not say it. He grins. That he knows the futility of that particular program does not prevent him from liking it. "Well," he says, "putting aside whatever Mary Penn might have to say about that, and putting aside what it means in the first place to be a living human, I don't think your old friend has left you in shape to live thankless." (283)

Wheeler sees that his words are beginning to make an impression upon Wheeler, that the young farmer is beginning to understand that part of what it means to be a human is to be joined to others in the world. That the independence humans treasure, that the fierce desire they might have to transcend the obligations of community, might ultimately make them not more human, but less. Wheeler continues:

"It's no use to want to make it on your own, because you can't. Oh, Glad Pettit, I reckon, would say you can, but Glad Pettit deals in a kind of property you can put in your pocket. Or he thinks he does. But when you quit living in the price and start living in the place, you're in a different line of succession."

Elton laughs. "The line of succession I'm in says you've got

to make it on your own. I'm in the line of succession of root, hog, or die."

"That may have been the line of succession you *were* in, but it's not the one you're in now. The one you're in now is different."

"Well, how did I get in it?" Elton says almost in a sigh, as if longing to be out of it.

"The way you got in it, I guess, was by being chosen. The way you stay in it is by choice."

"And I got in because Mr. Beechum chose me."

"And Mary. He chose you and Mary. He thought you two were a good match, and that mattered to him. His own marriage, you know, was not good. Yes, you could say he chose you. But there's more to it. He chose you, we'd have to say too, because he'd been chosen. The line is long, and not straight." (284)

Thus, Berry makes clear that Wheeler, and those who, like him, would look forward in hope to the good that is possible in the world, rely on visions of past righteousness to embolden them. They acknowledge the grace that is at work in the world, the kind of grace by which one man would find himself dependent on another, and choose to remain that way; the kind of grace by which communities live or die. This is the political and economic world that Wheeler thinks is possible. As a prophet, he has taken upon himself the burden of advocating for such a world. Even as he practices law within contexts and among adversaries that often devalue the same things that Wheeler values, he still continues to wrestle on behalf of justice, because he realizes that where

there is justice, human community can be something sacred and solemn, not just something to endure but something to celebrate. Wheeler has determined to use his skills and his gifts to serve those who need them most, those who--whether they know it or not--cannot thrive as individual entities, but must join themselves to others.

The prophetic stubbornness that allows Wheeler to fight these battles is evident in other, later stories as well. In *The Wild Birds*, for example, Berry offers readers a glimpse into Wheeler's office:

Wheeler has been sketching at a speech. In that restless hand of his, that fairly pounces on each word as it comes to him, he has refined his understanding of the points to be made and has worked out the connections. What he was struggling to make clear is the process by which unbridled economic forces draw life, wealth, and intelligence off the farms and out of the country towns and set them into conflict with their sources. Farm produce leaves the farm to nourish an economy that has thrived by the ruin of land. In this way, in the terms of Wheeler's speech, *price* wars against *value*.

"Thus," he wrote, "to increase the *price* of their industrial products, they depress the *value* of goods--a process not indefinitely extendable," and his hand rose from the page and hovered over it, the pen aimed at the end of his sentence like a dart. The last phrase had something in it, maybe, but it would not do. At that failure, his mind abruptly refused the page. A fidelity

older than his fidelity to word and page began to work on him...His thought leapt from his speech to its sources in place and memory, the generations of his kin and kind. (339-340)

Berry does not reveal how long Wheeler has been working at this speech, or where he intends to deliver it. The fact is, Wheeler has been laboring at this speech for most of his career, and maybe even before that; and he has been delivering it in his everyday transactions, in the cases he has taken on and those he has rejected, in the conversations he has had with members of his community and in the ways he has shared life with them. That he labors over this page is meant to signify that Wheeler's task is lonely but important work. The words matter because the terms in which Wheeler traffics--price and value--have profound, even religious meaning to him. This is his prophetic vision, rooted--as Berry says--in the place, in the memory and the generations that have preceded him. And he clearly hopes that the vision will endure after he is gone.

Wheeler's prophetic legacy, then, comes to bear on the way that the community of Port William conducts itself, in the way that they depend on each other, and in the way that men like Elton Penn, Nathan Coulter, and other young men of the town grow to understand the Port William membership as something sacred and binding, a kind of covenant. It also lives on in Wheeler's sons. If the prophetic vocation, like other vocations, is one that can be handed down from generation to generation, it is obvious that Henry and Andy Catlett have inherited something of their father's commitment to justice, and something of their father's perspectives on community, which they honor in their own work. Henry, while not a frequent character in Berry's fiction, is nonetheless very much his father's son.

Probably modeled to some extent on Berry's brother Thomas, who followed his father into the legal profession, Henry is the "& Son" part of the law firm that occupies Wheeler in his later years, and Wheeler's successor as the legal expert and advocate of Port William. Like his father, Henry seems to have rooted his own practice as an attorney not in some abstract concept of the "law" but rather in something deeper and more mysterious--the friendship and loyalty to a place and to one another that binds his community together.

One of the few stories in which Henry plays a pivotal role is also the one in which he most clearly and powerfully articulates the extent to which he has inherited his father's prophetic vision of law, justice, community, and power, and how these elements sometimes work on behalf of, and sometimes against, one another. The story is the title piece from the 1992 collection *Fidelity*. The plot of this story centers on the abduction of Burley Coulter from a Louisville hospital so that this man of the woods might die in surroundings that he loved. The perpetrator of the "crime" is Burley's son, Danny Branch. The episode from the story that most directly involves Henry Catlett involves an exchange between Henry and Kyle Bode, the detective sent to investigate the case and to make an arrest. The conversation begins, much as Wheeler's conversation with Clara and Gladston Pettit, with the attorney/prophet calling the detective to account, speaking truth in the name of justice. After Bode tells Henry that he has "a good set of fingerprints" as evidence in the case, he finds that:

Not the Henry of their recent philosophical exchange but an altogether different Henry, one he had never encountered before, was looking at him point-blank, the glasses off.

"Mr. Bode," Henry said, "that was a lie you just told. As a matter of fact, you don't have any evidence. If we are going to get along, you had better assume that I know as much about this case as you do. Now, what do you want?" (410)

It is a moment that unsettles Bode, because it makes plain that he will not be able to manipulate language toward obfuscation, in an attempt to attain his desired ends, which--in Henry's estimation--are unjust.

As the conversation continues, Henry maintains a position of unflinching commitment toward some higher principle than "the law" as understood by men like Kyle Bode:

The detective made his tone more reasonable, presuming, somewhat upon his and Henry's brotherhood in the law: "Mr. Catlett, I'd like to be assured of your cooperation in this case. After all, it will be in your client's best interest to keep this from going as far as it may go."

"Can't help you," Henry said.

"You mean that you, a lawyer, won't cooperate with the law of the state in the solution of a crime?"

"Well, you see, it's a matter of patriotism."

"Patriotism? You can't mean that."

"I mean patriotism--love for your country and your neighbors. There's a difference, Mr. Bode, between the government and the country. I'm not going to cooperate with you in this case because I don't like what you represent in this case."

“What I represent? What do you think I represent?”

“The organization of the world.”

“And what does that mean?” In spite of himself, and not very coolly, Detective Bode was lapsing into the tone of mere argument, perhaps of mere self-defense.

“It means,” Henry said, “that you want whatever you know to serve power. You want knowledge to *be* power. And you’ll make your ignorance count, too, if you can be deceitful and clever enough. You think everything has to be explained to your superiors and concealed from your inferiors. For instance, you just lied to me with a clear conscience, as a way of serving justice. What I stand for can’t survive in the world you’re helping to make, Mr. Bode.”

(411)

The world that Mr. Bode is helping to make, in Henry’s eyes, is one that uses power to serve power, and uses “justice” to unjustly destroy communities like Port William. The message that Henry relates to the detective in this passage, and that his fellow citizens demonstrate throughout the story, is that community is not merely a good idea that can be replaced by other ideas when it is convenient. Community, for these people, consists in an agreement to fight for and with one another. It is a binding agreement, a solemn loyalty that holds the membership together, and it is within this context--not outside of it--that the members are able to realize most fully their potential as human creatures.

What makes this story different from the one in which Wheeler argues similarly against the values of the Pettits is that Kyle Bode does, by story’s end,

undergo a conversion of sorts. Encountering Danny at a gathering of Burley's friends and family, a gathering convened by Henry and presided over by Wheeler, Bode first demands justice, but then realizes the defeat of what he has come to Port William to represent:

The room was all ashimmer now with its quiet. There was a strangely burdening weight in Kyle Bode that swayed him toward that room and what had happened in it. He saw his defeat, and he was not even sorry. He felt small and lost, somewhere beyond the law. He sat down. (426)

Janet Goodrich has aptly compared this scene to the story of Jesus' entering the upper room after his resurrection, but I would argue that there is also something here of the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus--the room ashimmer, the disorientation of one who had been so confident, the concession to a new perspective, a humbling, and therefore happy defeat. It is the work of prophets like Henry Catlett to bring about such conversion, even within the most recalcitrant of audiences.

Another conversion story that Berry tells involves Wheeler Catlett's second son, Andy, and doubles as a prophetic call narrative. Andy's profession is not the law, but rather language. Andy is the teller of a number of Berry's stories, a sort of guardian of the narrative history of his people. In this way he preserves the past so that in that past resources might be found for present and future reconciliation. This is a prophetic task, and Andy's powerful convictions about community--which mirror Berry's--equip him for it. But these convictions are hard-won in Andy's case. The novel *Remembering* is the story of Andy Catlett's

journey home and also his journey toward an acceptance of his vocation. As P. Travis Kroeker has argued, the re-discovery of community within the novel sacramentally functions as the re-discovery of Andy's humanity (125). The novel's opening lines clearly depict Andy as a character not in communion with others but rather in exile: "It is dark. He does not know where he is. And then he sees pale light from the street soaking in above the drawn drapes. It is not a light to see by, but only makes the darkness visible" (122). The causes of this exile, this dismemberment, are neither wholly physical nor spiritual, but involve Andy's whole self. Shortly prior to the story, Andy has experienced a disfiguring accident that has left him without his right hand. The loss, understandably, shakes Andy to his core, leading him to question his usefulness and his significance to his community. And so Andy has left Port William and traveled to San Francisco--ostensibly on business, but more obviously to escape, to wallow in the rift that he can feel widening between himself and those he loves. He has cloistered himself within the anonymous space of a motel room not so that he can reconcile with what he has fled, but so that he might vigorously nurture the estrangement that threatens to consume him.

Yet even in this state of self-imposed exile, in which he deliberately and stubbornly pushes against anyone who attempts to draw close to him or to offer support--his friend Nathan, his father and brother and mother, his children, and especially his wife Flora--Andy cannot escape his dreams. Like his father Wheeler, he is a seer of visions, and the tormented visions that play across his imagination as he tries to sleep serve to document his stubborn alienation, and also begin to convert him, to draw him back home. In his first vision, he sees a fat

man behind a desk in a long, windowless corridor, eating the flesh from his own forearm and declaring to anyone who will listen: "Neighbors? I have no neighbors. Friends? I have no friends. This is my independence. This is my victory" (123). Thus, the vision brings Andy to confront his darkest impulses. When he wakes, he begins to realize what he has lost: "...as he looked upon that destroyed place, which once had been his home, he realized that even as he mourned it he could not remember it as it was; he could find in his spirit no vision of anything it ever was that it ever might be again" (123). By cutting himself off from his community, he has lost something of his prophetic gift, that hopeful wisdom that his father possessed that allowed him not only to imagine healing, but to work toward it.

Because this is a conversion story, a story of re-membering what has been dis-membered, Andy's exile at the beginning, and his lonely reckoning with the darkness in his room, in himself, and in the world, serves as a starting point for his journey back into the life to which he had been called: a life of justice, a life of righteousness, a life committed to the concrete demands of a living community. Before coming to San Francisco, Andy has spoken at a conference of agricultural writers, academics in the field of farm sciences, most of whom have been "off the farm" for decades. Standing at a lectern before the audience, he attempts to do what his father and brother have done, what it is assigned to prophets to do--to speak for the voiceless. He delivers an imprecatory litany of complaints on behalf of the "small farmers" of Port William and places like Port William. But as he does so, he finds that he is not unburdened. Because he has exiled himself from his community, he experiences no relief in advocating for that

community. He steps down from the dais, sweaty, unsettled, frustrated at his inability to speak for justice (137-140).

Unable to speak as he intends to speak, and still feeling the weight of his dismemberment, Andy wanders, and as he wanders, he visits other visions-- scenes from the past; scenes of time spent with men like Elton Penn and Nathan Coulter, times that have made him who he is. He reflects on his and Flora's decision to return to Port William after making his living in the cities of San Francisco and Chicago as an agricultural writer. He thinks about the epiphanies, which may have seemed at the time rather mundane, involving conversations with Amish farmers and agri-business visionaries, and memories of discussions with his father Wheeler on the importance of having a home in a place that mattered. These epiphanies and conversations ultimately compelled him to give up writing for publications like *Scientific Farming* and to become a farmer who writes about farming from within a real, farming community. He thinks about the blessings that he has received by virtue of living among and serving his neighbors in Port William. While reflecting on a simple moment of shared laughter within the context of his relationship with Elton, Andy is struck by the notion that they were both enjoying the moment, "both grateful to be in the same story" (136). It is through this recovery of a gratitude to be sharing a story with the people he loves that Andy ultimately recovers his place in the community. He is able to overcome his self-imposed exile and to regain not only his desire to tell the stories of Port William, but his ability to do so in an effective and prophetic way. As the novel ends, Andy returns home to be reconciled to those whom he has wounded by his stubborn isolation. He sleeps a fitful sleep and is visited by

yet another vision. Those who populate this vision are not metaphorical fat men eating the flesh of their forearms, but rather real people, the people of Port William, those who are dead, yet alive:

He sees that he lives in eternity as he lives in time, and nothing is lost. Among the people of that town, he sees men and women he remembers, and men and women remembered in memories he remembers, and they do not look as he ever saw or imagined them. The young are no longer young, nor the old old. They appear as children corrected and clarified; they have the luminous vividness of new grass after fire. And yet they are mature as ripe fruit. And yet they are flowers.

He would go to them, but another movement of his guide's hand shows him that he must not. He must go no closer. He is not to stay. Grieved as he may be to leave them, he must leave. He wants to leave. He must go back with his help, such as it is, and offer it. (221)

This is a vision of both the past and the future; it is an apocalyptic vision; and it is a vision that conveys to Andy the sanctity of the community, and his place in it. It is a vision that compels him to reenter the community in order to share life with them, in order to help them, however he can, with his words and with his wisdom. As the final step in his re-membering, he confronts the fact that he cannot finally exile himself completely from this body. The people who constitute the body are a part of him, as he is of them. The prophet is nothing without his people, and Andy is nothing without the Port William membership.

THE ANTI-PROPHET IN MCCARTHY'S FICTION

Perhaps the most significant distinction--among many--between the fictional worlds created by Berry and McCarthy is the role that communities play in shaping those worlds. As noted earlier, within Berry's work, the existence of healthy, reconciling (albeit imperfect) communities like Port William, or the possibility that such communities might still exist as an alternative to the dominant culture, is presented as one last, remaining hope of humanity living within the world. Community, for Berry, is good news, and he is appropriately evangelical in his expressions of it. In McCarthy's world, the possibilities presented by and in human community are decidedly less sunny. Communities, in McCarthy's fictions, are powerful forces, but they are almost always forces bent toward evil; they are almost always bad news. Even when communities exhibit good intentions (such as *The Orchard Keeper's* uneasy alliance among its major characters, or the reckless band that seems to attempt to foster real tenderness for one another within the pages of *Suttree*), these intentions are usually thwarted or abandoned, so that community at its best is ultimately ineffectual.

Communities in most of McCarthy's fiction--the father and son of *The Road* are a small, but prominent exception-- are certainly no better in terms of their impact on the world than the individual wanderers, the nomadic loners that Brian Evenson and others have found so prevalent in McCarthy's work. In many cases, these communities are quite a bit worse, as their capacity for destruction becomes exponentially greater when one human being's murderous rapacity is joined to another. In the 1985 novel *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's complex

masterpiece that describes, among other things, the movements of a scalphunting party in the untamed West, the author presents the following vision of what community might become:

Crossing those barren gravel reefs in the night they seemed remote and without substance. Like a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse. A thing surmised from the blackness by the creak of leather and the chink of metal...They rode on. They rode like men invested in a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote. For although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions of old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds. (152-153)

McCarthy points to something within this band that is primeval, ancestral, instinctual, and destructive. The evidence of this destruction can be found throughout the novel: in the murderous ways they deal with each other; in the ways they can enter into a wilderness town like a plague of locusts and leave it completely destitute; in the rape and murder that come to define them, the cold brand of justice they mete out, not only toward the “savages” they have been hired to kill, but toward every living thing that crosses their path. It is this feature that, according to Edwin Arnold, makes this novel an even more challenging one than *Child of God*. For while the actions of one man like Lester Ballard might be

chalked up to an aberrant sort of evil, or (more likely) to insanity, when we read *Blood Meridian*, we have to confront the notion that “Extreme variations of such acts by men united--men who are mostly sane, capable of moral distinctions, bound by certain shared values; men who are our historical forefathers, separated from us by only three or four generations--must confound us from every perspective” (61).

I believe that it is McCarthy’s intention to thus confront and confound his readers by demonstrating the atrocities of which humans in community are capable. Within this novel, a common theme in McCarthy’s writing is amplified: community is not a context in which holiness might be cultivated, or even one in which righteousness might be fostered, but rather one in which one’s own darkest impulses feed off of those at work in the man riding beside him. If one is to find the truth, or to experience whatever light or gentleness might exist in this world, then each discrete individual is advised to go searching for that on his own. Within a community, a seeker is more likely to be taken advantage of than to find anything beneficial or edifying. Within a community, he is more likely to find shared hatred than aspiration toward health. Within the communal soul, he will find not the divine spark of illumination but rather “wastes hardly reckonable”. And at the center of these wastes, as at the center of every community, there is a voice that shapes the collective, providing the spiritual core and casting a sort of vision for the community. For the Glanton gang of *Blood Meridian*, that voice issues from the imposing and terrifying Judge Holden. Judge Holden is among McCarthy’s most complicated and fascinating characters. According to John Sepich, the character is modeled on a figure out of Samuel Chamberlain’s *My*

Confession, an autobiographical account by a member of the real-life Glanton gang. Like McCarthy's character, the historical Holden was duplicitous and enigmatic. He lived according to a self-imposed and nebulous standard of right and wrong. He is alternately presented as a murderous rapist and a gentle giant, a well-educated and articulate predator (14-16).

Among the qualities of the historical Holden that survive in McCarthy's creation is the man's mysterious magnetism. He possesses a charisma that few of McCarthy's characters have, making him a prime candidate to be the spiritual leader of the gang. More than any of McCarthy's creations, he is also a man of incredible giftedness. One of the qualities that allows the Judge to strike such an outsized figure not only in the reader's imagination but also within the imaginations of his fellow characters is his seemingly superhuman abilities, his command of innumerable talents. He is described by critic Dana Phillips as "the life of the party" (35). A member of the Glanton gang named Tobin describes him thus:

That great hairless thing. You wouldn't think to look at him that he could outdance the devil himself now would ye? God the man is a dancer, you'll not take that away from him. And fiddle. He's the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that's an end on it. The greatest. He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He's been all over the world. Him and the governor they sat up till breakfast and it was Paris this and London that in five languages, you'd have give something to of heard them. The governor's a learned man himself he is, but the judge...(123)

In addition to being a charismatic and talented man, the judge is also a man of incredible cruelty, so that he uses his gifts not to bring about goodness or peace or justice, but rather to gain a foothold in the lives of those around him, that he might bend their purposes toward his own. Unlike figures such as Wheeler Catlett or Andy Catlett, and unlike those throughout history who would answer the prophetic vocation to reverence community and to work for the sake of a community, the judge seeks to transcend his community--even to transcend the human community. He thus exercises an authority over the community of which he is a part, and uses his charismatic presence and performative speech to manipulate and bend that community toward the fulfillment of his vision of the way the world should be.

A case could certainly be made for Judge Holden as one who embodies any number of “spiritual” or “religious” vocations (or more accurately, parodies thereof), including those discussed elsewhere in this paper. Sara Spurgeon has presented him as a sort of priest for the gang, pointing most specifically to the “Black Mass” in which he conjures forth gunpowder out of its raw materials and shamanistically empowers the men to slay their enemies (84). He is also, in this passage and in others, presented by McCarthy as something of an anti-pilgrim figure; he is a wanderer who seeks not to reverence creation but to dominate it. This is most obvious in passages in which the judge catalogs birds and other creatures and presses the leaves of flowers into his notebooks. He does this not so that he might learn more about these creatures for their own sake, or even so that he might enjoy their beauty, but because, in his words, “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.” He believes that “only

when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand before [man] will he be properly suzerain of the earth" (198).²⁹

I have chosen to read the Judge as an anti-prophet because of the fundamental role he plays in not only leading, but in providing a philosophical ethos to what is perhaps McCarthy's most problematic community. Although one origin story told by the band about the judge states that he had once been with a wagon company and "fell out to go it alone" (125), Holden is no mere individualist. Like the prophet of Heschel's studies, like the Catletts of Berry's stories, Holden is nothing without his people. His chief role within the book is one of imposing his will on an otherwise random collection of men, in order to shape them into something in which he takes delight. He does not exist for the sake of the community, but sets himself, however subtly, above his fellow creatures.

Moreover, I find significance in the fact that Holden uses two of the most important facets of human community--law and language--in order to bend this community not toward justice, but toward his own will to power. Thus, like Wheeler and Henry Catlett, he is presented as a man of the law, although as several characters remark, it is unclear what part, if any, Holden has ever played within the institutional order of the legal system: "What's he a judge of?" asks the kid at one point (135). And while he might pay lip-service to the notion that there are forces greater than he at work in the universe, he seems to believe even more strongly that it falls upon himself to exercise his power upon all those who are unfortunate enough to make his acquaintance, and to achieve his ends, whatever cost there might be to some external standard of justice.

I also read the judge as a (false, or anti-) prophet because of his facility

with language. Even among his impressive qualities--his musical nature; his artistic acumen; his military prowess; his scientific curiosity--the judge is first and foremost a master of speech. Like Andy Catlett, he knows what human language can do. Unlike Andy Catlett, who refuses to tell the stories that publications like *Scientific Farming* want him to tell, the judge's aim in narrating certain events is not to lift up the powerless, but to overcome them. Linda Townley Woodson remarks that, in episodes like the story he tells about the harnessmaker and the traveler--a parabolic story, rehearsed "in the manner of a recital" ("De Los Herejes" 143)--the judge proves that he is "the embodiment of language" (Woodson "Leaving" 268). He knows the power of a story to shape reality. He knows how significant words properly (or improperly) used can be. He knows that he is gifted in this area, and he uses this gift both to destroy and to create--to destroy those he perceives to be weak and to create a community of the strong in his own image.

While Adam Parkes reads Holden as a character whose "mode of existence is above all performative" (110), I would argue that for most biblical prophets--whether one reads Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, with its elaborate drama of sacrifice; Zedekiah's iron horns with which he encourages King Ahab to gore the Arameans; or Ezekiel's strange enactments of Judah's destruction and restoration--speech and performance go hand in hand. Judge Holden is, therefore, equal parts professor and preacher, carnival-barker and metaphysician; but in every role he plays, he serves the cause of power--specifically, the power that he wishes to possess. Every statement he makes, whether in word or deed, is meant to articulate the claim that the judge makes

when he places his hands on a plot of ground and declares, "This is my claim. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine, nothing must be permitted to occur on it save by my dispensation" (199). He is a man who hungers and thirsts for dominion, one who desires not to serve a community but to control it; and the act of satisfying that hunger and that thirst, the achievement of complete control, begins with his powers of persuasive speech.

When the kid--through whom the reader watches the novel's action unfold--first encounters the Judge, it is at a tent revival. The scene that transpires demonstrates not only the judge's contempt for honoring the community through careful speech, but also his embrace of speech as performative, and the gift he has of taking a crowd captive and subjugating them to his will:

An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bald as a stone and he had not trace of beard and he had no brows on his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height and he stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God and he seemed to have removed his hat only to chase the rain from it for now he put it on again.

The reverend had stopped his sermon altogether. There was no sound in the tent. All watched the man. He adjusted the hat and then pushed his way forward as far as the crateboard pulpit where the reverend stood and there he turned to address the reverend's congregation. His face was serene and strangely childlike. His

hands were small. He held them out.

Ladies and gentlemen I feel it my duty to inform you that the man holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised. He is altogether devoid of the least qualification of the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purpose of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises. In truth, the gentleman standing here before you posing as a minister of the Lord is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas. (7)

It is a bravura performance. The judge has seemingly considered carefully every gesture, calculating every aspect of his presentation so as to win the crowd to his side before they pause to examine the veracity of the facts that he puts forth. This is probably an effect of his training in legal argument; it is also an aspect of the realm of the prophetic, in which performative speech and dramatic presentations are often to be found in the work of true and false prophets alike. It matters very little to the judge if the charges he levels against the preacher are true (and indeed, he confesses to the kid, minutes later, that they are completely fabricated). He has gotten their attention, so that when he goes on to say that the preacher had recently been caught in the act of “violating” an eleven year-old girl “while actually clothed in the livery of his God,” and that he had been “run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat,” he hardly needs to repeat himself (but does anyway): “Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat” (7). He has

managed to work the crowd into a murderous frenzy. Gunshots are fired, people trample one another in an attempt to escape the chaos, and the revival tent sways, buckles, and finally collapses in on itself. The scene, while comical, serves a definite purpose. It is something like a rehearsal for the judge, and a harbinger for McCarthy's readers, of what is to follow.

The judge displays these qualities--a contempt for the truth and an uncanny ability to manipulate it toward his own ends--at several other places in the novel. One such example takes place shortly after Jackson, a member of Glanton's gang, shoots the owner of a restaurant. A group of armed officials enters the cantina where the judge sits drinking with Glanton. They are "not a hundred feet" from the scene of the crime. When questioned about the events, Glanton flatly denies not only his company's involvement in the crime; he also denies that his men have ever set foot in the establishment. When the lieutenant presses Glanton on the matter, the judge interjects, to take false umbrage at the situation and to address the matter not only in legalese but also in a higher and more solemn vernacular, the language of a code of honor:

Kindly address your remarks to me, Lieutenant, said the judge. I represent Captain Glanton in all legal matters. I think you should know first of all that the captain does not propose to be called a liar and I would think twice before I involved myself with him in an affair of honor. Secondly I have been with him all day and I can assure you that neither he nor any of his men have ever set foot in the premises to which you allude. (237)

The lieutenant, seeing that he cannot win this argument, leaves the cantina.

When he returns later in the evening, he and the judge discuss points of the law. The lieutenant nods, with pursed lips, as the judge translates for him several Latin terms regarding jurisprudence (238). Once again, the judge manages to turn a lie into the truth, simply by the way he speaks and performs his version of reality.

Even more integral to his prophetic role than his legal and linguistic expertise--or more appropriately, the end to which these gifts are employed--is the judge's role and vocation of casting a vision among the community. Wheeler Catlett, Berry's "seer of visions," calls the citizens of Port William to embody the hope of what is possible. Andy Catlett, likewise, seeks, through narrative, to draw his hearers, his community, toward a vision of life together that reconciles itself to the place they call home. The judge is also a visionary. He is a philosopher, uttering declamations with the sagacious air, the furrowed brow and the piercing gaze that his community would expect. As Sara Spurgeon argues, the judge's primary aim in both his storytelling and in his rituals is nothing less than the birthing of a new myth, he cultivates a feel for myth, and narrative, deconstructing the stories of the past so that he might oversee the construction of a new order (79). And so, just as important as his mode of presentation is the content of the judge's vision. It is a cold and unsparing vision, one that offers no quarter to the weak. It is a vision of order founded not on mercy, or even on justice, but on man's inexorable will to power, and the manifestation of that will in the rule of the strong, and the triumph of warfare. It is a view that Spurgeon articulates thus: "For the judge, moral law, good and evil, wrong or right are simply trivialities enshrined by one church or another, one religion or another. Questions of right

and wrong are subsumed by the force of will made manifest in war (94).

Following the judge's story of the harnessmaker and the traveler (a story that makes gestures towards a "Good Samaritan" ethic of mercy, only to defeat that ethic in the story's resolution) Tobin asks the judge, "What is the way of raising a child?" The judge's answer evinces his political vision: "At a young age, they should be put in a pit with wild dogs. They should be set to puzzle out from their proper clues the one of the three doors that does not harbor wild lions. They should be made to run naked in the desert until..." Here, Tobin interrupts the judge, assuming that he is being ironic. But the judge remarks that his answer is one given in earnest, and the reader understands that this commitment to the survival of the strong and the destruction of the weak is perhaps the only thing about which the judge is completely serious (146).

In a later scene, the judge further unpacks his views on the struggle for survival. Comparing life to a game of cards, he declares:

In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (249)

To the claim, unconvincingly offered, that might does not make right, the judge

answers:

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law perverts it at every turn...Here there can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void and without warrant and here are the views of the litigants despised. (250)

If war is god, and if it establishes its own standard of justice, it is clear that Holden, the judge, is this god's prophet. Unlike Wheeler and Andy Catlett, who would lament the notion that small farmers and decent human beings would be swallowed up by political, industrial, and economic forces outside their control, Holden does not only acknowledge this fact but actually exults in it.

For Holden it is a beautiful thing that war weeds out the weak from the strong. Holden marvels at nothing so much as he marvels at the unstoppable forces of death and destruction at work in this world. In light of these forces, he argues that all moral, spiritual, and natural decisions are rendered moot. It is a compelling view, compellingly presented, but not a view that tends toward reconciled or reconciling communities. This is evidenced in the novel by the fact that, despite occasional protestations, such as those offered by Tobin, against the judge's view, the Glanton gang performs according to its script. They participate in the game and exult in their victimization of the weak as well as their victories over the strong. They demonstrate convincingly Holden's negative view of community, that "What joins men together is not the sharing of bread but the sharing of enemies" (307). For Holden, it would seem that the only value in

community lies in the fact that by joining a group it becomes easier to visit destruction upon another group, bringing one that much closer to his final goal of suzerainty and dominion over every living thing. This is the judge's goal throughout the novel, to be a formative influence imposing his ethic on a whirlwind of havoc out of which no god speaks except the judge himself.

This is not to say that no character resists the judge's vision or seeks to embody an ethic that interrogates the appropriateness of might triumphing over weakness. Rick Wallach argues convincingly that this novel, for all its gore, actually challenges the martial code that the judge espouses ("From Beowulf" 200). And while the Glanton gang effectively embodies the judge's principles with every village they terrorize and with every woman or child they slaughter, at least one of their number, the kid, feels remorse and seeks atonement for his crimes against humanity. Throughout the novel, at various points, the kid displays the truly prophetic ethic of mercy where the judge would have him exercise its opposite, proving himself an unworthy acolyte to the judge's order. As Spurgeon puts it, "The judge continually tests whether or not the kid will obey the rules of the antimyth, and the kid continually fails" (95).

With this repeated failure comes decisive retribution. The kid's reward for betraying the judge's vision is to bear the guilt of the judge's--and the gang's--sins. Near the novel's end, authorities arrest the kid, on the judge's recommendation, and Holden visits the kid in jail to pronounce his judgment against him. He indicts the kid for not giving himself wholly to the community that the judge had forged with his impressive words and with his bloody vision:

You came forward to take part in a work. But you were a witness

against yourself. You sat in judgment on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf ear to me. If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay. Even the cretin acted in good faith according to his parts. For it was required of no man to give more than he possessed nor was any man's share compared to another's. Only each was called upon to empty out his heart into the common and one did not. Can you tell me who that one was? (307)

What is remarkable about the judge's speech is how he uses the language of community, the language of brotherhood, to convict the kid of the crime of mercy. If the judge has a vision of community, it is not a vision of justice, but of domination. And because the kid could not abide that vision, the judge cannot abide the kid.

The final confrontation between the two characters takes place in a saloon, fifteen years after their encounter in the jail cell. As penance for his sins, the kid has become a guide for travelers passing through the wilderness, shepherding the weak through a harsh and unforgiving landscape. It is a solitary existence, but one that the kid enacts in service to others. His travels bring him to a town on the plains of North Texas, and there he meets the judge. Holden greets the kid: "The last of the true. The last of the true. I'd say they're all gone under now saving me and thee. Would you not?" (327). If the community that the judge created in the wilderness has all perished, and the judge and the kid alone

remain, then the kid is the only one living who still might challenge the judge's vision, or his version of the truth. The kid does indeed resist, until a moment, later in the evening, when he steps unawares into an outhouse where the judge has been waiting for him: The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him (333). In that outhouse, the judge puts an end to the kid's life and any vestige of resistance to his terrible vision.

Having thus dispatched the kid, the judge returns to the dance floor inside the saloon, where McCarthy presents him one last time:

And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. (335)

The judge is a man who sees the world in terms of struggle, and he is also a man who seeks to prevail in that struggle. If life is both a war and a dance, he will fight and he will dance more fiercely and more vigorously than any other. In order to be the last one dancing, the lone representation of vitality in a world of death, he will lie, and he will dissemble, he will murder and he will consume and he will smother in his enormous mass of flesh those who do not conform to his will. Leo Daugherty is correct when he writes that "Judge Holden looks very much like the Gnostic conception of Yahweh--he is vengeful, he is jealous, he is wrathful, he

has a will, and he is outraged by anyone or anything outside of that will" (163). In order to become like god, *sicut deus*, Holden must not only transcend, but also destroy the community that he has created. He does so with his words and with his actions, so that as the novel comes to a close, he is the solitary dancer, alone among a crowd, towering over the rest of the human community in his godlike power.

CONCLUSION

In the Catlett men and Judge Holden, Berry and McCarthy present powerful and contrasting visions of the effects that charismatic individuals can have on their communities. Each of these men is a seer of visions. Each is gifted in his capacity to use language to cast those visions and to construct a world. But whereas Berry's characters embrace their prophetic vocation by spurring their community of Port William on toward justice in the ways they do business and the ways they treat their neighbors, Judge Holden uses his gifts to exercise unchecked and unquestioned authority over his community and succeeds in bending them toward his darkly brutal vision of life. Where the Catlett men exist for the sake of their community, Holden seeks to transcend his community, believing that he can realize his potential as a human being only when he has risen above all those who are weaker than he. In this way, he is as vivid a representation of an anti-prophet as Berry's characters are of the prophetic. And just as Berry's characters present readers with concrete embodiments of what it looks like to seek reconciliation within community, Holden demonstrates the consequences of a prophetic imagination that is governed primarily by a destructive will to power.

CHAPTER 6

For the pilgrim, earthly places are understood as contexts of holiness. While one common perspective on pilgrimage would recognize a few places as sacred, a broader, more inclusive form of spirituality would acknowledge that the world in which human beings live, the places they inhabit on a daily basis, and the spaces through which they travel regularly also possess some capacity to inspire reverence. This view necessitates and encourages a certain kind of relationship to the created order. If the dualistic or gnostic perspective on creation is that of an inherently corrupt and corrupting realm, a context in which the human soul can never be at home, because it only occupies this world as a result of some cosmic tragedy, the pilgrim's vision is rather one of being at home in the world. On the other hand, the pilgrim's ethic is one in which holy wonder springs from a careful and conscientious attention to the mysterious and the beautiful within creation.

In addition to opposing the gnostic view, the pilgrim will also oppose the strictly utilitarian view--present in some readings of Genesis 1:28--that posits creation merely as a storehouse of natural resources, which should be used for pleasure or convenience, but which has no inherent worth or value. This view, perhaps most widespread in the modern, post-industrial world, robs creation of any spiritual significance, and renders impossible the wonder that should accompany the pilgrim's habitation of this world. In contrast to both of these

perspectives--the gnostic and the utilitarian--the pilgrim will reflect in his life the divine hospitality that Norman Wirzba understands as an essential component of creation, a making of room within daily habits and practices to demonstrate "God's original peace and delight" with the world that he has made.

The life of a pilgrim is necessarily an ambiguous one, however, because even as the pilgrim feels at home in this world, his existence is also one of movement. More than either of the other two vocations discussed earlier, the pilgrim is a traveler. He or she necessarily moves through the world, and the journey on which the pilgrim embarks is an important component of the growth, the discovery, and the encounter with the transcendent that would make a life "spiritual." The posture of being at home and the act of traveling are not contradictory in the life of the pilgrim, but paradoxically represent two sides of the same vocation. Not all movement is identical; the journey of the pilgrim within a hospitable creation, a journey through which the traveler awakens to the sacred possibilities at work all around him, is clearly not the same as the flight from darkness that defines the gnostic's travels.

The pilgrim differs from the fugitive (as Berry's characters often differ from McCarthy's) in that he is not running from something such as the consequences of sin, or from some difficulty or limitation that will ultimately prove to be inescapable. Rather, the pilgrim understands his journey as moving toward a goal--toward worship, or celebration--and also understands the journey through this world as an important part of reaching that goal. The journey, and not just the destination, is for the pilgrim a context of wonder, of joy, and even of worship. The places that the pilgrim inhabits and passes through on the way toward a

literal or figurative destination are hospitable spaces, so that while the fugitive can never really be at home in this world, the pilgrim can find a home wherever he might be.

The importance of place, and the significance of finding a home in this world, is a central element in the fiction of Wendell Berry, even among those characters who are more mobile than others. In addition to those who are firmly rooted in Port William, his novels and short stories are also populated by a number of travelers; often, however, these travelers are coming home. This should not be surprising, as Berry's own relationship to his place, as recounted in his essays "A Native Hill" and "Notes from an Absence and Return," involves the experience of coming home, and the revelations that accompanied his experience of encountering his home anew, as a place where mundane wonders present themselves every day.

Thus, in addition to the journey of Andy Catlett in *Remembering*, a journey that mirrors both that of his father Wheeler and also that of Berry himself, Berry also narrates the homecomings of Art Rowanberry and Nathan Coulter, two young men sent away to war³⁰, and the long journey back to Port William of Jayber Crow, as recounted in the novel that bears his name. Each of these men, in his return, encounters anew the delight and the beauty of the place, and then is gradually drawn back into a more deeply intimate connection with the people who inhabit that place, who care for that place, and who bear witness daily to the goodness of that place. In all of these stories of homecoming, Berry treats culture and nature--community and creation--not as dualistically opposed entities but rather as realities that mutually influence and benefit from one another. It is

possible--and likely, in Berry's view--that the earthly place in which his characters live does not represent a burdensome limitation, as a holding tank or waiting room that will have to do until something better presents itself, or until those characters get to die and go to heaven. Rather, this earthly realm, the created order, serves as a context in which something of heaven is actually present, and in which the proper posture is not one of restless anxiety or existential despair, but rather anticipatory wonder. In "A Secular Pilgrimage," Berry speaks to the presence of this quality in some of the nature poetry of the mid-twentieth century; the essay, despite the inclusion of "secular" in its title, offers real insight into what the spiritual vocation of the pilgrim might look like to Berry. He deems the quest or aspiration that he finds in this poetry 'secular' because--like much of Berry's own work--it does not intentionally locate itself within a specific, institutional church. He deems it a pilgrimage because "it is nevertheless a religious quest":

It does not seek the world of inert materiality that is postulated both by the heaven-oriented churches and by the exploitive industries; it seeks the world of the creation, the created world in which the Creator, the formative and quickening spirit, is still immanent and at work. (6)

Later, Berry advances the assumption "That perhaps the great disaster of human history is one that happened to or within religion: that is, the conceptual division between the holy and the world, the excerpting of the Creator from the creation" (6). The quest of the pilgrim will be directed toward the reconciliation of this division. Throughout his career, this same quest has unfolded, and this same impulse has been at work in Berry's poetry, his fiction, and his essays. And if, as

Janet Goodrich and others have noted, Berry has tempered his polemic against the institutional church, he has not done so at the expense of the sacredness which he and his characters often find in the natural world. Berry's pilgrims, and they are many, move through the world and work in the world thoughtfully and reverently, and thus experience the kind of hospitality and graciousness that is proper to a healthy communion with the land.

BURLEY COULTER: BERRY'S TROUBLED PILGRIM

In Berry's early novel *A Place on Earth*, Berry presents a letter written by Burley Coulter to his nephew Nathan, who is serving in World War II. In the letter, Burley describes himself, in contrast to the preacher-types who have passed through Port William in his time there, as someone with "a knack for the here" rather than the hereafter (*A Place on Earth* 104). By this phrase, Burley means to say that he has more of a mind for the earth than for heaven. He is, in his estimation, a man who lives for today without giving too much thought to the afterlife. So there is an aspect of Burley's "knack for the here" that applies to time. Beyond that, however, the quality in Burley also has a spatial element. It describes Burley as someone who has learned to value what is in this world as having a particular and powerful kind of beauty. Transcendence, for Burley, does not necessitate flight; rather, in this world and in his enjoyment of the simple majesty it provides, Burley can glimpse something of heaven. Among all of Berry's characters, Burley seems to demonstrate the most potential to embody the sentiment at the heart of Berry's poem, "The Wild Geese," a poem that belongs in the same conversation with the work of those nature writers Berry discussed in "A Secular Pilgrimage". In the poem, Berry writes, "And we pray,

not/for new earth or heaven, but to be/quiet in heart, and in eye/clear. What we need is here." In his knack for the here, his cherishing of the good things that this world offers, Burley stands as one of the most foils in Berry's fiction to the gnostic mindset; he also demonstrates, in his own ambiguously righteous way, what it means to be a pilgrim traveling through the world.

This is not to say that Burley always embodied this vocation so easily. The reader of Berry's narratives would be forgiven for a failure to see Burley Coulter as a positive example of much of anything, especially spirituality. He is a memorable character, even an enduring character. He loves and embraces life more fully and more energetically than any of Berry's characters. And he is obviously an attractive character for his laughter and his boldness, but not, it seems, because of his holiness. Throughout the better part of his life, to hear his fellow characters tell it, Burley is something of a black sheep, Port William's resident mischief-maker. While he is a man of many talents, he excels at none so much as sin, and while he inspires a great deal of merriment among his friends and neighbors, he is just as likely to provoke frustration and disappointment. As his mother exasperatedly poses the question after one of his notorious benders, "Oh Burley, why do you have to be so bad, Burley?" (*Nathan Coulter* 24).³¹

Burley's potential as a pilgrim, however problematic, is easier to understand if readers understand where his characteristic sinfulness originates, and how this sinfulness--the habits and attitudes that make him a problematic character, conceal or obscure his more positive qualities, the ones that make him a type of the pilgrim. The word most often used to describe Burley Coulter, in his early and middle years, is "wild." In the perception of other characters, especially

Burley's parents, this designation is most applicable to his attitude toward convention, including the conventions that define life in Port William. In contrast to a number of Berry's characters, there is something in Burley that cannot abide order. In most stories, such as "A Consent," Berry uses this wildness for humorous effect. In the story, set in 1908, a thirteen-year-old Burley forgets the poem he was supposed to memorize for a class recitation and attempts to replace it with a bawdy story (35). At other times, however, especially in Berry's debut novel *Nathan Coulter*, it is obvious that Burley's wildness threatens his place among the citizens of Port William. It obscures the positive aspects of his relationship to the earth, his "knack for the here," and makes him a somewhat problematic character within Berry's work, as anything other than a clown. Lacking the seriousness or gravitas of Mat Feltner, Wheeler Catlett, or his brother Jarrat Coulter, Burley is an especially unlikely candidate to represent the pilgrim vocation of viewing the world with loving reverence. If anything, Burley would seem to inhabit the category of those who despise the creaturely limitations that come with life in this world. Burley refuses to be tamed or burdened or restrained in any way. He envisions himself as a free spirit, and seeks the kind of freedom that comes not through obedience or discipline, but rather through disobedience to everything but his own desires and dictates. By the end of his life, however, in stories like "The Wild Birds" and "Fidelity," Berry demonstrates that Burley's journey through life has been one of responding in love to the people and places that surround him. He learns to reconcile his natural wildness with the limitations presented by community, the responsibilities that come with love, so that he grows to embody one who is at home in the

world, rather than bucking against any and all restrictions.

The first aspect of Burley's life that potentially makes him a problematic pilgrim is his relationship to work. When Burley first walks onto the stage of *Nathan Coulter*, his two coon-hounds follow closely behind, "sad-looking and quiet because they knew he was going to work and not hunting" (5). The countenance of the dogs is undoubtedly meant to reflect that of their master. Later in the novel, Nathan relates that Burley brings grief to his mother because of his sinfulness (his drinking and carousing), but that he is a disgrace to his father because he never wants to work (35). In Berry's worldview, these two complaints are more closely related than even the Coulters seem to understand.

Burley's negative attitude toward work presents a problem for the reader of Berry because one of the perennial themes within Berry's stories is the way that a proper relationship to creation is necessarily bound up with the careful and loving manner in which his characters work. For most of Berry's characters, work is a kind of communal and religious ritual that joins them to the earth from which they receive their sustenance, as well as to one another. It is a ritual in which Burley participates when he has to but only with great reluctance. If the curse of toil is envisioned as the consequence of sin that demonstrates humanity's estrangement from nature, many of Berry's characters demonstrate how good work goes a long way toward healing that rift. But, to the consternation of his father and to the amusement of others, Burley would rather hunt, fish, or drink than work in the fields with the more responsible men of the community.

Burley's early wildness is also problematic in the way it manifests in his relationship to the land. Unlike his fellow citizens of Port William, Burley refuses

to acknowledge or nurture a formal connection to a piece of land. Despite being a part of a farm family with roots in the region stretching back generations, Burley takes pride in his stubborn commitment to absolute freedom:

Uncle Burley didn't own any land at all. He didn't own anything to speak of; just his dogs and a couple of guns. In a way he owned an old camp house at the river, but it was Uncle Burley's only because nobody else wanted it. He'd never let Grandpa or Daddy even talk to him about buying a farm. He said land was worse than a wife; it tied you down, and he didn't want to be in any place he couldn't leave. He never did go anyplace much, except fishing and hunting, and sometimes to town on Saturday. But he wanted to feel that he could leave if he took to the notion. (6)

In Berry's agrarian vision, as well as his biblical one, the land is a gift. It is a gift that challenges and rewards its beneficiary. It is a gift that demands accountability from the one who would lay claim to it. Thus, it is a gift worthy of respect, a gift that gives delight even as it takes hold of a person. For Berry, to accept this gift, to commit oneself to a particular piece of land, so that the land belongs to the man because the man belongs to the land, is an integral aspect of being human. It is no accident that Burley (ironically) employs the language of marriage in dismissing the gift. That is exactly the sort of relationship that Berry conceives of, in his vision of those who would live in a place faithfully. If creation is a gift, however, Burley refuses to accept the responsibilities that go along with it. Burley's resistance to own land is not as much a problem here as is the reason he gives for that resistance--that he does not want to be tied down, that he does

not want the land to demand anything of him. This puts him at odds with his family, and also with the author's ethic of what makes a right relationship to the natural world.

Finally, Burley is a problematic pilgrim in the reckless, sometimes destructive ways that he relates to other creatures. As mentioned numerous times already, Burley is an avid hunter and fisherman. This does not in and of itself present a problem; a number of the responsible citizens of Port William often join Burley on his hunting trips, and as I will show later, it is during these sojourns in the woods--especially the ones that Burley takes in solitude--that his intimate relationship to the earth is most strongly forged. But, as he is depicted in *Nathan Coulter*, there are some instances in which his wildness is manifest in selfishness or carelessness, and other creatures suffer because of it. Two incidents in particular, both described in *Nathan Coulter*, provide examples of this. The first takes place at the Fourth of July picnic. Burley sets up a booth at which customers can attempt to win money by throwing an embroidered ring around a duck's neck. Early on, the ducks do what is expected--they duck, making the contest all but impossible to win. This wins Burley a great deal of money and infuriates his customers. As the day wears on, however, and the ducks grow tired, they begin to let the customers win, more often than Burley would like. Burley senses that he is about to lose all his winnings, and more besides, so he leaves the booth in the care of his two nephews, Tom and Nathan, and disappears. As Nathan relates, Burley reappears a few minutes later, creatively solving the problem that the ducks have created for him:

I was wondering what in the world I'd do if somebody else

won and found out that I didn't have enough money to pay him, when I saw the head fly off of one of the ducks. It couldn't have been done any neater with a butcher knife, but nobody was even close to the tank. I looked over at the shooting gallery, and there was Uncle Burley popping away at the target and ringing the bell every time. Then I saw him lead off toward the ducks as if he were making a wing shot; and another duck flopped in the tank.

When he'd killed all the ducks Uncle Burley walked off toward the other end of the carnival without looking back...Everybody stood around, looking at us and looking at the ducks and looking at Uncle Burley going off through the crowd, with their mouths open. Then they all laughed a little and began to straggle back into the carnival. (53)

Later in the novel, Nathan relates the story of the prank that Burley plays on a game warden, dispatched to Port William to investigate claims that someone has been fishing with dynamite, depleting the fish population and ruining the fishing for other residents of the area. Burley makes no attempt to hide his dislike for this practice, and condemns those who engage in it. But instead of assisting the warden, when Burley is questioned, he allows his contempt for authority to override any concern he might have for good fishing practices in Port William. He takes Nathan and the warden out onto the lake, and hands the warden a half-stick of dynamite with a lit fuse. When the warden throws the dynamite into the water and a number of dead fish surface moments later, Burley collects the fish and sells them to the warden for ten cents a pound,

thereby implicating the warden in the same practice he had come to prosecute (87-88).

Thus, in several episodes throughout his first novel, Berry demonstrates how Burley Coulter's wildness can be disappointing to his family and neighbors and destructive to other creatures and to the world in which he lives. In the problematic ways that Burley often relates to his world, he strongly resembles some of McCarthy's characters, those who seek to transcend their limitations by exercising their power and their freedom over their communities and over the world in which they live. Because Burley so insistently refuses to be bound by anything or humbled by anything, he fails to demonstrate the humility that is prevalent in Berry's descriptions of true spirituality--the humility that would lead someone to treat the world in which he lives as a context in which holiness might be developed, and one in which a robust communion with nature might correspond, in some mysterious way, to a robust communion with God. The ways that Burley uses nature in this book more often represent a one-way relationship, concerned above all to Burley's pleasure.

But there is another side to Burley's wildness, which complicates the character. If this wildness makes him resistant to most forms of order--and therefore reluctant to allow his community, social conventions, or even the land, to tame him--Berry makes it clear elsewhere that this wildness, as Burley's defining characteristic, also binds him to creation. In "A Secular Pilgrimage," Berry notes that

The nature poets of our own time characteristically approach the subject with an openness of spirit and imagination...Their art has an

implicit and essential humility, a reluctance to impose on things as they are, a willingness to relate to the world as student and servant, a wish to be included in the natural order rather than to “conquer nature,” a wish to discover the natural form rather than to create new forms that would be exclusively human. (4)

It seems that, on a closer reading of Burley Coulter, this same kind of humility, resulting in a connection to the natural world rather than a detachment from it, is at work in him. Despite Burley’s remarks about land being “worse than a wife” in the way it lays claim to a man, he actually enjoys a stronger communion with the land and with other creatures than many of Berry’s characters do. In his affinity for the natural world--unstructured and disordered as it might be--Burley demonstrates a union with nature that makes it possible for his life-journey to be a pilgrimage. This communion is evident, albeit in a latent way, in the Burley of *Nathan Coulter*, and becomes more obvious as the character matures, so that by the time he reaches the end of his life in “Fidelity,” the character has grown into a man who embraces the world as a context of hospitality and even mystical wonder.

While the Burley found in Nathan Coulter sometimes embodies a complex and troubled relationship toward the land, there are signs that he is sympathetic or compassionate toward creation. While he refuses to take much of anything else seriously, Burley is deeply affected and even penitent when his actions bring harm to other creatures. While he may affect an uncaring posture, he is unable to exploit or hurt other creatures without feeling remorse. Thus, after the incident with the ducks at the Fourth of July picnic, Nathan describes Burley as

uncharacteristically somber. While others laugh at what Burley has done, and resume their enjoyment of the day's festivities, Burley "just carried his red frog and didn't say anything." When Big Ellis, Burley's friend and sometimes partner in crime, offers him a drink of whiskey, Burley takes it silently and drinks it joylessly: "And the happier Big Ellis got the sadder Uncle Burley got. Those ducks had hurt his feelings and he couldn't get over it" (54). Usually the life of the party, the first one to crack a joke or to enjoy an impromptu whiskey tasting, Burley is somber; he cannot shrug off what he has done, even as everyone else around him celebrates. Likewise, after the incident with the game warden and the dynamite, Burley is obviously not his usual, boisterous self. He calls off the fish fry he had planned, remarking, "I'm tired of fish," and it is obvious even to Nathan that Burley is ashamed of what he has done (54). These may be modest examples of righteousness--perhaps what the apostle Paul calls "godly sorrow"(2 Corinthians 7:10)--but I read them as significant, in that they point to qualities in Burley's character, a strong bond with nature, a potential for humility,³² that, over time, will come to define him.

While this kind of humility manifesting in remorseful compassion is presented only in glimpses, it is hospitality that most characterizes Burley Coulter as he grows into his vocation; more accurately, it is his capacity for enjoying the hospitality of creation. He is clearly at home in the world. Even among a community of men who live close to the land, Burley is special. Others sojourn into the wilderness for a time, to fulfill a purpose; only Burley seems to be more himself when he is in the woods. He knows the woods intimately, and is at home there. In "A Secular Pilgrimage," Berry distinguishes between the nature poetry

which “has had a constant interest in one or another of the concepts of nature” and the poetry in which “the immediate and particular manifestations of nature are acknowledged and looked at for their own sake” (15). Paradoxically, it is the latter type of poetry that is the more religious, in that it attends more carefully to the beauty inherent in particularities, and makes room for the wonder therein, so that surveying a landscape becomes a practical kind of discipline, but one that engenders communion. This same kind of attention to detail, the kind of hard-won knowledge of a place, apart from any sort of detached, philosophical reflection, Burley prominently displays in a number of stories; and like everything else with Burley, this is a discipline that matures as he matures, even deepening in its religious significance as the character grows older.

In terms of chronology, Berry first presents Burley as a natural woodsman in the short story “Watch With Me,” set in 1916, when Burley would have been twenty-one years old. In the story, a search party of some of the men of the town has set out to recover a mentally unstable member of the community named Nightlife, who has wandered into the woods with a gun. It is a dangerous mission, both because it involves pursuing an unpredictable man with a firearm, but also because it means traveling into the woods to do so. Early in their expedition, the men encounter Burley, wearing “three-days whiskers”, and playing a practical joke on one of the members of the party (106). Burley joins their number, and it soon becomes evident that, although he is the youngest of the group, he is also the one most familiar with the land. When night begins to fall, Tol Proudfoot suggests that Burley take the lead (109). As the night drags on, it is Burley’s close familiarity with the land that allows the group to track

Nightlife without getting lost, and it is Burley who leads them out of the woods when no one else knows quite where they are.

As Berry demonstrates in *Nathan Coulter*, Burley never outgrows his love for the woods. As he matures, however, his time in the wilderness ceases to be only about pleasure or avoiding work, and takes on a deeper significance, even a religious quality. This, more than anything, is what impresses Burley's friend Wheeler Catlett, as he reflects on Burley's life, and on the differences between himself and his friend, in the story "The Wild Birds." As the two men reach their final years--the story revolves around Burley's desire to change his will, motivated by an awareness that he will not remain in the world he loves for much longer--Wheeler recognizes the transformation that has taken place within Burley during the time that he has known his friend. Wheeler is aware of the ambiguity of Burley Coulter, the way in which his life has been one of struggle. He has grown, in Wheeler's estimation, from "the wildness of his young years, through his years of devotion in kinship and friendship, to his succession as presiding elder of a company of friends. It has a pattern clear enough, that life, and yet...it is a clear pattern that includes the unclear, the wayward" (345). But throughout these transformations, the one constant that has held steady within the pattern of Burley's life is his familiarity and his communion with the life of the woods. It is this element of Burley's wildness, more than his earlier mischief, that defines Burley for his longtime friend.

Wheeler further reflects on how, in their younger days, he would accompany Burley on his hunting trips. But Wheeler also acknowledges that his journeys into the woods were not the same as Burley's: "It was another world

they went to. Wheeler, as often as he went, always went as a stranger and a guest. Or so it seemed to him, as it seemed to him that Burley always went as a native, his entrance into the wild darkness always a homecoming" (346). For Wheeler, these entrances into the woods would have been foreboding were it not for the company of Burley, who, far from dreading or fearing what was in the darkness, embraced it in a sort of joyful comfort. Unlike Wheeler or most of the other men of Port William, Burley has often entered into that darkness alone, so that he passes "over into a freedom that is old and, because it is strenuous and solitary, is also rare" (347). Burley's entrances into the woods, unlike Wheeler's, are organic and unplanned, originating in response to nothing but Burley's deep and abiding communion with his surroundings: "They start almost accidentally, these hunts, and they proceed according to the ways of coon and hound, or if the hunting is slow, according to the curiosity of a night traveler over his dark-estranged homeland" (347).

Over time, Burley has learned to overcome his natural contempt for farm work, gradually becoming a dependable and steady companion in the fields; but he still embodies a sort of double consciousness, so that Wheeler calls him "a man of two loves, not always compatible" (347). He may have submitted, out of love for his neighbors and family, to the disciplines of domesticity, and even the convention of keeping a good farm, but when he joins those he loves in the fields and barns, he still appears to Wheeler to have "something of the aspect of a visitor from the dark and the wild--human, friendly to humans, but apt to disappear into the woods" (349) Because there is, and has always been, this mysterious element to Burley, Wheeler does not seem shocked or even taken

aback when, during the course of their conversation, Burley speaks of the importance of being able to answer to God for what he has done:

What has been here, not what ought to have been, is what I have to claim. I have to be what I've been, and own up to it, no secret faults. Because before long I'm going to have to look Old Marster in the face, and when he says, 'Burley Coulter?' I hope to say, 'Yes, Sir. Such as I am, that's me.' (356)

Burley does not present himself as someone who has suddenly "gotten religion" because he understands that death is nearer than ever before. Death does not seem to frighten him particularly. Rather, his desire for integrity, even righteousness, seems to have developed, in its own time, by virtue of Burley's relationship to the people and the land around him. As he has learned to submit to them, he has also embraced the notion that righteousness before God might matter. If he has become more of a spiritual person in his later years, it is safe to say that this journey, like his trips into the woods, began by accident and unfolded unexpectedly, until one day Burley awoke to find himself at home "right here," in the midst of that land and that community that he had previously seen as a burden to be avoided.

It is in the story "Fidelity" that Burley's earthly journey, his pilgrimage through this world, comes to an end. And it is in "Fidelity" that Berry provides the most detailed and religiously charged account of Burley's relationship with the natural world, and of the sacredness that reveals itself within the context of that relationship. When the story begins, Burley as a very sick man, "little more than hide and bone" (372). Having avoided the severity of his condition for as long as

they could, his family make a decision that they immediately regret. They take him to a doctor, who admits him into the hospital in Louisville, where he will presumably die.

Even before the decision is made, it is obvious that those who know Burley best are troubled at the prospect of taking him to the city to spend his final days and hours in a sterile room among the hum of machines. Long gone is the Burley of *Nathan Coulter*, who wished to avoid making any real commitment to the place where he was born and the place where he lived, the Burley who wanted to be free to cut all ties and simply leave on his terms. This Burley, the one who has reached the end of his life surrounded by the membership and the landscape that he loves, has developed a deep and abiding communion with the land, and it is a feeling that they might be somehow transgressing against this communion that vexes those close to him. In a conversation with his wife Hannah, Nathan takes his stand on the principle that Burley should die as he had lived--close to the land:

“Are you--are we--just going to let him die like an old animal?” Hannah asked.

And Nathan, resistant and grouchy in his discomfort, said, “An old animal is maybe what he wants to die like.”

“But don’t we need to help him?”

“Yes. And we don’t know what to do, and we’re not going to know until after we’ve done it. Whatever it is. What better can we wish him than to die in his sleep out at work with us or under a tree somewhere?”

“Oh,” Hannah said, “if only he already had.” (374)

To wish for such a death for someone that we care about is a fairly common human response to terminal illness. Yet, in Burley's case, as the story unfolds, it is clear that there is a deeper significance to Nathan's desire. It is not just that Burley's dying “under a tree somewhere” would be more comfortable or more peaceful--it would be right. And for Burley to die anywhere else--particularly in a hospital room--would be wrong. It is this distinction that serves to drive the story's plot, as Burley's community of family and friends assist in his final pilgrimage--the only real homecoming that Burley has experienced since he returned from the first World War some sixty years earlier.

The primary agent in this mission of mercy is Danny Branch, Burley's son by Kate Helen Branch. It is Danny who acts on behalf of the Port William membership, and most significantly, on behalf of his father, to take (some would say steal) Burley from the Louisville hospital and to bring him back home to the woods in which he had lived out his communion with the land. As Danny travels, he reflects (as Wheeler Catlett had done in the story “The Wild Birds”) on the time that Burley has spent in the woods, and the grace and wholeness that have been a part of his life due to these sojourns:

In love Burley had assumed many responsibilities. In love and responsibility, as everyone must, he had acquired his griefs and losses, guilts and sorrows. Sometimes, under the burden of these, he sought the freedom of solitude in the woods. He might be gone for two or three days or more, living off the land and whatever leftovers of biscuits or cornbread he might be carrying in his

pockets, sleeping in barns or in the open by the side of a fire. If the dogs became baffled and gave up or went home, Burley went on, walking slowly hour after hour along the steep rims of the valleys where the trees were old. When he returned, he would be smiling, at ease and quiet, as if his mind just fit within his body. (381)

While the younger Burley of "Watch With Me" and "Nathan Coulter" had retired to the woods primarily to hunt, there seems to be some other purpose at work in the times of solitude that "Fidelity" describes. Even in the absence of his dogs, Burley wanders slowly and deliberately over the landscape. These rambles resemble nothing so much as Berry's own Sabbath walks, described in volumes of poetry such as "A Timbered Choir"; they are pilgrimages in nature, journeys in which the wonder of the place makes itself known. And it is in the midst of this wonder that Burley, the most incorrigible rebel among Berry's protagonists, was able to discover himself mind and body, as a unified, wholly human being.

This idea of the woods as the place where Burley most fits inside his skin is repeated after Danny brings Burley from the hospital to a barn in Stepstone Hollow, where the two men had spent many nights together seeking shelter from the rain. Danny lays Burley down on a pallet, covers him, and shines a light on his face:

In its profound sleep, it wore a solemnity that Burley, in his waking life, would never have allowed. And yet it was, as it had not been in the hospital, unmistakably the face of the man who for eighty-two years had been Burley Coulter. Here, where it belonged, the face thus identified itself and assumed a power that kept Danny standing

there, shining the light on it, and that made him say to himself with care, "Now these are the last things. Now what happens will not happen again in this life." (386)

That such a solemnity, such a power, and such a peace could converge to reveal themselves in the face of a dying man, in a barn in the wilderness, is an affront to any theology or philosophy that denigrates the world as a realm of corruption or a prison to be escaped. For Burley Coulter, the world--represented by the woods, the place to which he had wed himself through long years of pilgrimage--is where one's true humanity is found.

Rather than seeking to transcend the world, Burley has learned over time the significance of communing with that world; I would argue that this communion, together with his communion with the Port William membership, has been Burley's training in holiness, so that when his death arrives later in the story followed by the burial which will literally return him to the earth, the soil, the humus from which he came, there is a peacefulness to these events that underscores the reconciliation with the world that Burley has effected in his life:

[Danny] knew as he entered the doorway that the breaths had stopped, and he stopped, and then went soundlessly in where the body lay. It looked unaccountably small. Now of its long life in this place there remained only this small relic of flesh and bone. In the hospital, Burley's body had seemed to Danny to be off in another world; he had not been able to rid himself of the feeling that he was looking at it through a lens or a window. Here, the old body seemed to belong to this world absolutely, it was so accepting now of all that

had come to it, even its death....(408)

And later, as Danny buries his father, he notes that “the body seemed to accept again its stillness and its deep sleep, submissive to the motion of the world until the world’s end” (413). The language employed here is language of acceptance, of submission, and of humility. It is language wholly appropriate to the human’s quest for holiness, as pursued within the limits of creatureliness, and within the discipline of a vocation. Burley Coulter, once the most undisciplined of Burley’s major characters, has learned what it means to give oneself completely. He learned it too late when it came to Kate Helen Branch, a decision that he laments in “The Wild Birds”; he learned it just in time to forge a special relationship with his son Danny. And he learned, perhaps most powerfully and most significantly, what it means to give oneself completely to a place, to be submissive to the wonders contained within a seemingly unremarkable piece of land, throughout his long years spent traveling over the hills and hollows around Port William, and those long nights spent sojourning in the woods, alone or with Danny. Thus, in this final acceptance, this final submission, Burley dies in the same pilgrim manner that he had lived, and his journey reaches completion.

DANNY BRANCH AS HEIR TO BURLEY’S PILGRIM VOCATION

The story “Fidelity” is significant not only because it narrates Burley’s death, and most explicitly reveals the mysterious and solemn connection between Burley and the natural world, but also because it is the story in which Burley’s legacy is most completely passed on to his son, Danny Branch. In the perspective of the other members of the Port William membership--particularly Hannah Coulter and Jayber Crow--Danny’s succession of his father’s ways

seemed the most natural and most appropriate thing imaginable. As Jayber Crow states, "Danny...was heir to much of his father's character and knowledge" (*Jayber* 311). Hannah expands on this insight, as she reflects on the rescue that Danny is undertaking on behalf of his dying father: "She smiled, for she knew, too, that Danny was a true son to Burley, not only in loyalty but in nature--that he had shared fully in that half of Burley's life that had belonged to the woods and to the darkness" ("Fidelity" 404).

Danny's birth, which Berry first recounts in *Nathan Coulter*, had been a matter of much interested speculation among the citizens of Port William. Burley was never married to Danny's mother, Kate Helen Branch; his wildness in those days would never have permitted anything so conventional as marriage. And it was not until after Kate Helen's death that Burley, in a meeting with Wheeler, finally and formally claimed Danny as his legitimate heir. But long before Burley made legal his relationship to Danny, anyone with eyes to see knew that there was a unique and powerful bond between the two. And it is this bond to which Hannah refers. In a later novel, *Hannah Coulter*, Berry provides Hannah with a further opportunity to reflect on the communion between Burley and Danny, and their shared communion with the land:

[Burley] regarded Danny simply as a matter of fact, and without marrying his son's mother, or making any other noticeable change, he simply afforded as much room in his life to Danny as Danny was able to occupy. The others were not more aware than they had to be that Burley even had a son until Danny appeared in person. He just more or less showed up, following

Burley through the woods and fields, Nathan said, like a toy dog on a string, with the smile he was going to be known for already on his face. It was a smile that was going to serve for many words. His eyes were black, as bright as buttons, forever trying to see everything, and not missing much.

He would follow Burley for hours, hunting or rambling in the woods, Burley saying almost nothing, Danny nothing at all. Danny grew up with the knowledge of the old economy of the natural world that, for nothing and for pleasure, yielded in its seasons game and fish and nuts and berries and herbs and marketable pelts. "He knows more about all that than he knows he knows," Nathan said, who knew a good deal about it himself and from the same source.
(148)

Thus, as a natural element of his patronage, Burley has taken it upon himself to impart to Danny the ways of the woods. This includes a wide range of practical knowledge--ways of receiving sustenance and even making a living in cooperation with the earth--that are integral to the pilgrim's travels. But Burley also bequeathed to his son during these times something less "practical" and more mysterious: that wondering, wandering love for the woods that so defined Burley's own character, the response of anticipatory and submissive awe and delight that characterizes the pilgrim's travels through the world. As Berry states in "Fidelity,"

Burley loved to be in the woods with the hounds at night, and
Danny inherited that love early and fully. They hunted sometimes

with their neighbors, Arthur and Martin Rowanberry, sometimes with Elton Penn, but as often as not there would be just the two of them--man and little boy, and then man and big boy, and at last two men--out together in the dark-mystified woods of the hollows and slopes and bottomlands, hunting sometimes all night, but enacting too their general approval of the weather and the world. (381)

From an early age, then, Burley conveyed, in the context of the "dark-mystified woods," what it means to commune with nature, not just to treat the woods as a hunting ground, but to enact a general approval of the world, a kind of solemn but delighted respect that, in Wirzba's terminology, might be described as worshipful, and to which Wirzba alludes in a passage from his essay, "The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life": "When Berry talks about our entrance into silence and darkness, his is a complex darkness that suspends and calls into question a habitual disposition to secure the world for ourselves" (156).

In Hannah's description of Burley's and Danny's rambles, cited above, two features seem significant in this aspect: the first is the periods of silence or quiet, during which Burley was not vocally schooling his son in some fact that might prove useful, but rather sharing with him in something profound; the second is her description of Danny's eyes, "black, as bright as buttons, forever trying to see everything." In Danny's eyes are reflected two important components of the pilgrim existence: a hunger and an openness, a willingness to learn and to allow what he learned to change him. Burley had certainly evinced in his own life the first of these qualities. The second one he learned over the course of his life. Where Danny seems to have something of an advantage even over his father,

that accomplished woodsman, is that the love that Burley speaks of in his later years, the love that taught Burley to submit, even in his wildness, to mysteries and to limitations that were greater than himself, was always present in Danny.

One explanation for this difference may lie in Danny's closeness to his mother, Kate Helen Branch; she was herself a woman open to love, and willing to receive into her life whatever responsibilities and limitations the world might see fit to give her. It is from her, as well as from other men in the town--such as Burley's brother Jarrat Coulter, Nathan Coulter, and Mat Feltner, that Danny learned what other characters refer to as his domesticity, his consistent, steady willingness--absent in his father--to be committed to a place and a community, and to work joyfully for the good of that place and those people ("Fidelity" 379). Thus, in Danny, Burley's troubled and tangled commitments are somewhat reconciled. And, unlike the rest of their neighbors in Port William, the love for the wilderness and the woods that these two men share is never really overwhelmed or overshadowed by their domestic commitments. For Burley, this means that he has to disappear from time to time. Danny, as Hannah states, "just included the wild world in his domesticity without worrying about the difference. He gathered the woods and waters into his homelife as a robin gathers mud and straw for her nest" (*Hannah Coulter* 150). These are exercises that reflect Wirzba's idea that "There is in Berry's language a profound sense that the mundane work of becoming a creature and making a home--what Berry describes as our being 'married' to a place--is finally work of the highest spiritual order" ("Dark Night" 155).

But if Danny is able to reconcile the domestic with the wild in his own life,

in a way that his father never could, this does not rob the wilderness of the quality of wonder that characterized Burley's night wanderings. In other words, Danny's communion with nature--while mundane in many aspects--is not for this reason any less spiritual or any less a context for sacredness. Not surprisingly, this quality in Danny's life is fully displayed in "Fidelity," as he shares with his father one final journey, a last pilgrimage, into the darkness of the woods. Throughout the story, Danny evinces those qualities that Berry noted as characteristic of the pilgrim in his early essay "A Secular Pilgrimage," especially the ability to attend to small details in the world, and a reluctance to impose his will upon the workings of the world. His journey through the place--even a journey as purposeful as the one described in "Fidelity"--is made with reverence and care. After Danny has accomplished his initial aim of bringing Burley to a place in the woods where he might rest for his last remaining hours, Danny himself is able to rest. His posture and attitude at rest, no less than that of his movements over the landscape, reflect an openness to the wonders of the natural world:

Though in his coming and going he had hardly made a sound, once he lay still in the woods around the barn reassembled a quiet that was larger and older than his own. It was as though the woods had permitted itself to be distracted by him and his burden and his task, and now that he had ceased to move it went back to its ancient preoccupations. The rain went on with its steady patter on the barn roof and on the leafy woods. (386)

The way that Berry juxtaposes in Danny's thought the weighty, mystical notion of

the woods' "ancient preoccupations," with the simple detail of the rain's steady patter reflects the manner in which these kinds of ideas are unified in Danny's thoughts. The mundane and the transcendent are joined. And so, too, as Danny rests, are joined the man and his surroundings in a comforting kind of communion: "And then he ceased to think either of the past or of what was to come. The rain continued to fall. The flowing branch made a varying little song in his mind. His mind went slowly to and fro with a dark treetop in the wind. And then he slept." (386)

In the first few moments after Danny awakes, a worshipful silence, in which Danny listens attentively to what the world has to say, permeates the scene:

He was lying on his back with his arms folded on his chest; he had slept perhaps for two hours, and he had not moved. Nor had anything moved in the barn or in the wooded hollow around it, so far as he could tell, except the little stream of Stepstone, which continued to make the same steady song it had been making when he fell asleep. A few crickets sang. The air was still, and in openings of mist that had gathered in the hollow he could see the stars.

Though he was cold, for several minutes he did not move.

He loved the stillness and was reluctant to break it. (386)

Berry presents the scene in language that conveys the heaviness of the moment--almost a sacramental or liturgical heaviness--so that, after a few moments, when Danny repeats to himself the refrain that has hung like a benediction over his

mission thus far, "These are the last things now. Everything that happens now happens for the last time in his life" (386), the statement is of a piece with the song of the stream, the songs of the crickets, and the dim light of the stars, creating an atmosphere of holiness.

As Danny continues to move within this atmosphere, fixing breakfast over a fire as he had no doubt done hundreds of times before, Berry employs the language of the pilgrim's joy. Danny is caught up in the wonder of the moment and realizes the largeness and the glory of the place where he finds himself:

As Danny watched, the light reddened and warmed in the sky. The last of the stars disappeared. Above him, on both sides of the hollow, the wet leaves of the treetops began to shine among the fading strands and shelves of mist. Eastward, the mist took a stain of pink from the rising sun and glowed. And Danny felt a happiness that he knew was not his at all, that did not exist because he felt it but because it was here and he had returned to it. (386)

This happiness accompanies Danny even as he undertakes the ponderous rite of digging a grave for his father, and of giving Burley at last to the earth, to creation and also to his Creator. While Danny works, he continues to listen attentively to the songs and sounds erupting around him. Significantly, Berry remarks that the grave Danny digs corresponds to those "that he knew the Indians of that place had made long before Port William was Port William" (386). He shapes a long, narrow box out of the earth. He cooperates with the soil, and he uses what the land provides, to say goodbye to his father.

Having placed Burley's body in his final resting place, he commences to

gather flowers, and as he does the ancient wisdom imparted to him by his father rushes back, so that unconsciously, as he picks the flowers that will make up his father's funereal bouquet, the name of each reveals itself:

...he went down along the creek and then up across the thickety north slope on the other side, gathering flowers as he went. He picked spires of goldenrod, sprays of farewell-summer and of lavender, gold-centered asters; he picked yellow late sunflowers, the white-starred flower heads of snakeroot with their faint odor of warm honey, and finally, near the creek, the triple-lobed, deep blue flowers of lobelia. Stepping into the grave again, he covered the shrouded body with these, their bright colors and their weedy scent warm from the sun, laying them down in shingle fashion so that the blossoms were always uppermost, until the grave seemed to at last contain a small garden in bloom. And then, having touched Burley for the last time, he laid across the upright sides of the coffin the broad covering stones, first one layer, and then another over the cracks in the first. (413)

This is a natural ceremony, a ritual of the woods. But it is also, unmistakably, a religious one. In Danny's every movement, the sacred and the mundane intermingle, so that the flowers and stones native to that place, while still flowers and still stones, also speak a word of holiness that only those who truly pay attention--pilgrims like Danny Branch and his father--can hear. Finally, as Danny's task and ceremony concludes, he pauses in his work to speak a prayer: He let the quiet reassemble around him, the quiet of the place now one with that

of the old body sleeping in its grave. Into that great quiet he said aloud, "Be with him, as he has been with us" (414). Berry does not specify to whom Danny is praying. As a Christian, Danny most likely utters his prayer to God. But this is not a God who is detached from the world, the God whom Berry heard preached in his own childhood worship services, the God whom he refers to in "A Secular Pilgrimage" as "the withdrawn author of forms and substances" (30). This is a God who is present in the great quiet, the ancient quiet that hangs over the woods, a quiet to which the pilgrim returns again and again, a quiet in which Burley Coulter has now been laid to rest permanently.

Danny's communion with nature, the ability to find goodness, even holiness, in the world, is not unique only to these special, pivotal moments in his life. Burley's legacy to him is a part of his everyday work, a part of his family life, simply a part of his being in the world. Like his father, Danny has a "knack for the here," and he and his family (his wife Lyda and their children and, eventually, grandchildren) demonstrate a way of life that resists the tendency, present sometimes even in the most faithful members of the Port William membership, toward flight. As Hannah articulates this quality:

Compared to nearly everybody else, the Branches have led a sort of futureless life. They have planned and provided as much as they needed to, but they take little thought for the morrow. They aren't going any place, they aren't getting ready to become anything but what they are, and so their lives are not fretful and hankering. And they are still here, still farming. They are here, and if the world lasts they are going to be here for quite a while. If I had "venture capital"

to invest, I think I would invest it in the Branches. (153)

Jayber Crow echoes this final sentiment when he says of the family, "If the world lasts, there are going to be Branches around here for a long time" (*Jayber* 313).

These statements summarize what is perhaps the most remarkable quality present in Danny and his family, and to some extent in Burley--the humility which allows one's fate to be bound up with the fate of the world, specifically the fate of a particular place in the world. Rather than seeking to transcend his world, or attempting to plunder his world, Danny understands that he and the world will survive best if they work together. Through good, careful work Danny's way of life moves toward reconciling that estrangement with creation that always threatens humanity's life in the world. The toil that results from the so-called curse is replaced in Danny's economy by joyful, albeit hard work, labor engaged in cooperation with his surroundings. Thus, instead of striving to produce only "thorns and thistles," Danny and the other Branches manage to enjoy some measure of abundance, even in times of scarcity.

Repeatedly, throughout Berry's stories and novels, other characters look upon the Branches in amazement. Hannah Coulter, Jayber Crow, and Wheeler Catlett all wonder at the way that Danny and Lyda, even when times are tough, manage to enjoy prosperity, as defined by a sustained contentment with what they have and with where they are. As Wheeler reflects in the story "The Inheritors":

Danny embodied much of the old integrity of country life that Wheeler had loved and stood for. In a time when farmers had been told and had believed that they could not prosper if they did not

“expand,” as if the world were endless, Danny and Lyda had never dreamed beyond the boundaries of their own place; so far as Wheeler knew, they had never coveted anything that was their neighbor’s. In a time when farmers had believed that they had to take their needs to market or they could not prosper, Lyda and Danny ate what they grew or what came, free for the effort, from the river and the woods. They drank water from their well and milk from their cow, and in winter sat warm beside a stove in which their own wood burned. Because Danny still worked mules, they grew much of their own fuel for farm work. They fertilized their fields mostly with manure from the animals. And so of course they prospered. (433)

Modern stereotypes notwithstanding, Danny, Lyda, and their family do not disengage from the constant rush toward expansion out of laziness. Any observer would note that these are hard-working individuals. Nor is their life fairly characterized as a “simple” one. As Berry says of his own choice to return to Kentucky, this way of life is far more complex, and involves far more discernment and deeper knowledge, than passive consumerism. But Danny and Lyda’s life is free of the anxiety that characterizes the modern world, and would make a man feel homeless and alienated within his own house. They are people freely at home in the world. They are people who wander through this world in a state of wonder and reverence, while at the same time enjoying a happy and respectful communion with their surroundings. They work with care, and receive the blessings of what the land has to give in return. To use theological terminology,

theirs is a grace-filled life, one in which the goodness of nature comes to bear on the events of the everyday.

This is the pilgrim existence, which was passed down to them by Burley Coulter and nurtured, as his was, through a long and loving engagement with a particular place. In small and mundane but significant ways, this is a life that comes to terms with the estrangement that so often characterizes humanity's life in the world. In this way, the vocation that Danny and his family embrace, the calling to be in the natural world, and to be of the world, to love the world as God loves the world, and to experience delight and wonder in the place through which they travel, is an embodiment of the properly spiritual life.

CULLA HOLME: LOST IN MCCARTHY'S COSMOS

McCarthy's perspective on the created order, as noted in chapter three, is perhaps the aspect of his work in which his syncretistic style is most prevalent. The range of worldviews and cosmologies on display across his corpus makes it difficult to classify in any neat or definite way exactly what McCarthy's view of nature is, or if the author even has one view of the natural world. Thus, one finds within McCarthy's work nods to Druidic and Native American perspectives that are decidedly more respectful of the created order, as well as versions of gnosticism. Also present are strains of Christian mysticism that pronounce this world a realm of darkness and strive against earthly limitations in order that the soul might reach its full potential in some ethereal realm.

This diversity notwithstanding, from the publication of *The Orchard Keeper*, which presents a small, rural community, no longer farming productively and on the verge of being swallowed up by encroaching forces of urbanity and

modernity, to that of McCarthy's most recent novel *The Road*, a tale of a father's and son's journey through a world ravaged by a man-made environmental apocalypse, a persistent theme dogs McCarthy's characters: the troubled relationship between humanity and its natural surroundings. For every Uncle Ather, Rinthy Holme, or Billy Parham, characters who attempt to connect with creation in some meaningful way, there are whole roving gangs, entire populations, of men and women who cannot or will not ascribe worth to the created order, and so wander through this world in a state of perennial estrangement. When choosing a character to represent the anti-pilgrim in McCarthy's fiction, as with the other vocations (or anti-vocations) discussed, a number of options present themselves. The most prominent, however, is Culla Holme, the tortured protagonist of McCarthy's brutal second novel, *Outer Dark*, a work that early McCarthy critic Vereen Bell described as "A disturbing account of not being at home in the world" (33).

As Dianne Luce states in *Reading the World*, from the time of its publication, *Outer Dark* has invited a number of critical opinions regarding its metaphysical grounding. Thus, William J. Schafer, one of the earliest voices of McCarthy scholarship, offered a more traditionally Christian reading of the work, seeing it as a parable about belief. Vereen Bell's early work favored a more nihilistic reading of the novel. Edwin Arnold's commentaries on McCarthy, particularly "Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness: Cormac McCarthy's Moral Parables," advocates with Schafer a Christian reading of McCarthy's body of work, including this early novel. And Christopher Metress, a later scholar, seeks a middle way between the work of Bell and Arnold, reading the novel as

embracing a *Via Negativa* mystical vision (Luce 64). While conceding that each of these readings is valid--and acknowledging the philosophical debt that *Outer Dark* owes to various strands of the Christian tradition, as well as more recent systems of nihilistic and existentialist thought, Luce ultimately concludes that the current of gnosticism, and the prevalence of gnostic symbolism and images, throughout this novel, provide the work with its most significant philosophical contributions: "The gnostic revaluation or deconstruction of what has come to be mainstream Christian teaching and especially the Judaic tradition that lies underneath it, may comprise the most prevalent (but not the only) pattern of metaphysical intimations informing the novel" (*Reading* 66).

I agree with Arnold, Metress, and others that this novel enters into conversation with portions of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures and the Christian tradition--particularly in the parallels one might draw between Culla and Rinthy as Adam and Eve figures, and also the similarities between the characters' journey through the nightmarish landscape of the novel and Dante's journey through the afterlife. I also concur with Luce, however, that the gnostic imagery, the gnostic symbolism, and ultimately, the gnostic cosmology of the novel, are impossible to ignore. While Luce explores numerous facets of gnosticism's influence on the novel, including its treatment of illuminating knowledge and the resistance of several characters to social structures, which are represented in gnostic thought by the Hebrew God of laws and commandments, the aspect of the novel that I will be exploring here is the relationship of the characters, specifically Culla Holme, to the natural world. There is a dualism at work in this novel, a fierce opposition between man and his world, that shapes Culla's actions, his

perspectives, and his journey, making him a compelling candidate to represent within a theology of spirituality the vocation of the anti-pilgrim, one who wanders through the world not in wonder or anticipatory reverence, but with disdain and dread toward everything he encounters.

The discussion of Culla Holme, and of his relationship to the world around him, a discussion which necessarily involves reflection on the cosmological orientation of the work, begins with a discussion of the novel's title. McCarthy's use of the term "outer darkness," as has been noted by Schafer and numerous other critics in the years since, possibly originates from a reading of the Christian scriptures, specifically the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus uses the phrase to describe a place of punishment, a realm to which those who are opposed to or unworthy of the kingdom of God--due to spiritual immaturity--will be banished:

And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:11-12).³³

Similarly, a passage from Matthew chapter 22, in which Jesus relates the parable of the wedding feast, seems to involve unworthiness in relation to the kingdom of God, or communion with God's people:

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot,
and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be
weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are
chosen (Matthew 22:11-14).³⁴

Finally, in Jesus' "Parable of the Talents" in Matthew 25, the unfaithful servant receives from his master the following sentence: And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30).³⁵ The reader will note that, despite the different circumstances in which the phrase "outer darkness" is used in English translations of Jesus' teaching, there is a common understanding of this context as one of punishment, complete with weeping and gnashing of teeth. And while there has been much debate surrounding the exact nature of the "outer darkness" of the parables, there seems to be a general agreement that it is designated as a place of punishment and exclusion, either in this world or in the next, a realm in which sin is met with retribution. These are certainly images that resonate with McCarthy's depiction of the characters in this story, particularly Culla.

Thus, those critics who read the novel's title as an explicit reference to the parables of Christ, present the "outer dark" in which Culla travels throughout the novel as a context of retribution, a world created in some sense by sin. There is certainly much to recommend such a reading, as the novel opens in the context of sin's aftermath--sin represented here by an incestuous coupling between Culla and his sister Rinthy--and the events of the novel unfold in response to that sin. One possible reading of the novel is that it depicts a Southern gothic version of

the narrative of Genesis chapter 3 and, subsequently, of Milton's *Paradise Lost*-- that is, the expulsion from paradise of a young man and a young woman who have transgressed God's commands. This would explain why the novel opens in darkness, as Rinthy prepares to give birth to the child she has conceived with her brother:

She shook him awake into the quiet darkness. Hush, she said. Quit hollerin.

He sat up. What? he said. What? She shook him awake from dark to dark, delivered out of the clamorous rabble under a black sun and into a night more dolorous, sitting upright and cursing beneath his breath in the bed he shared with her and the nameless weight in her belly. (5)

Rinthy's shaking of her brother interrupts her sleep and puts an end to a dream that Culla was having, a dream that also symbolizes the inescapable spiritual and psychological darkness that has been created by his shame at what he has done:

There was a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores. The sun hung on the cusp of eclipse and the prophet spoke to them. This hour the sun would darken and all these souls would be cured of their afflictions before it appeared again. And the dreamer himself was caught up among the supplicants and when they had been blessed

and the sun began to blacken he did push forward and hold up his hand and call out. Me, he cried. Can I be cured?

The prophet looked down as if surprised to see him there amidst such pariahs. The sun paused. He said: Yes, I think perhaps you will be cured. Then the sun buckled and dark fell like a shout. The last wirethin rim was crept away. They waited. Nothing moved. They waited a long time and it grew chill. Above them hung the stars of another season. There began a restlessness and a muttering. The sun did not return. Now the dreamer grew fearful. Voices were being raised against him. He was caught up in the crowd and the stink of their rags filled his nostrils. They grew seething and more mutinous and he tried to hide among them but they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark and fell upon him with howls of outrage. (6)

The novel's opening dream, like others that occur throughout the narrative, reveals the crushing weight of Culla's guilt by using images of a cold and suffocating darkness. He clearly desires healing and reconciliation, but is unable to obtain it. Instead of being able to transcend his shame, he succumbs to the darkness. The howls of the crowd that presses upon him could be a parallel to the weeping and gnashing of teeth described in Jesus' parable, or of the execrations of demons depicted in literary and visual representations of divine judgment. The stink of the rags, like the stench of sulfur in numerous descriptions of hell, only adds to the oppressive nature of the vision, reflecting the state of Culla's mind and spirit when the novel begins. Because of their sin, the psychic

and spiritual world that both Culla and his sister inhabit is a world of darkness and nightmarish dream-visions; it is a world in which the innocence of the past--of their childhood, of a time when the unthinkable had not become reality--has been shattered. Thus, one could certainly argue that, as those whose actions have rendered them unfit for the heavenly banquet, the two occupy a spiritual outer darkness, a world shaped by their guilt.

Further exacerbating the spiritual darkness created by his sin--and making Culla a prime candidate for the category of anti-pilgrim--is the journey that he undertakes after the birth of his child. The journey could be read as a spiritual flight, an attempt to escape from the consequences of his sin. Thus, just as Adam hides from God in the garden, as described in Genesis 3, Culla shuts out the community that he suspects (rightly) will judge and condemn him for his actions. McCarthy describes the self-imposed state of isolation in which Culla exists in the novel's opening pages: "There had been no one to the cabin for some three months, he himself coming harried and manic into the glade to wave away whoever by chance or obscure purpose should visit so remote a place, he himself slogging through the new spring mud four miles to the store and back once a week for such few things as they needed" (6). When the tinker, a traveling salesman, approaches the house, Culla warns him off: "Sickness here, he called. Got sickness" (6). When Rinthy starts to feel labor pains, and reminds Culla of a promise he had made to get help when the time to deliver came, Culla balks, and refuses to seek assistance (6). The "sickness" to which Culla refers in his conversation with the tinker could describe his sister's physical state, but could just as adequately refer to the shameful guilt that hangs within the cabin the

brother and sister share.

After the child is born, Culla continues to attempt to hide from or to flee the consequences of his actions. He abandons the baby in the woods and tells Rinthy that the child died, as though by doing so, he might be able to escape the guilt that has weighed heavily upon him, and banish the darkness from his psyche. If this is Culla's design, it is ultimately frustrated; throughout the novel, as he undertakes a journey that will remove him from the scene of the crime, as it were, the darkness does not dissipate but only intensifies. Luce notes that the persistent references to Culla's shadow are a rehearsal of gnostic symbolism, which characterize the shadow as the earthly "stain of sin," a reminder of Culla's guilt that follows him throughout his journey (Luce *Reading* 76). And of course, nowhere is the evidence of Culla's inability to escape his guilt stronger than in the manifestation of the so-called "Unholy Trinity" of the novel, which critics like George Guillemin have read as a psychic projection of Culla's darkest impulses, and which plague not only his movement through the world, but also wreak violence upon those whom Culla encounters.³⁶ The outer darkness into which Culla is cast, even before the novel begins, and through which he wanders as the novel unfolds, is certainly a context of spiritual conflict, and retributive suffering, perhaps in keeping with the common reading of the phrase in Jesus' parables.

But Culla's journey through the novel is not only a spiritual one. Like all pilgrimages, the journey may have a spiritual component, but it unfolds within the realm of physical space. Just as Culla's flight, his attempts to escape sin, have a spiritual quality, and spiritual consequences, this flight also engages the natural world in some very vivid ways. And although this novel distinguishes itself from

McCarthy's other Appalachian works by occurring in a dream-like and nonspecific reality, evincing a greater affinity with *The Road* than either *The Orchard Keeper* or *Child of God*, McCarthy's interest in depicting physical landscapes is just as present here as in those other novels. This work may function, in the manner of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as a spiritual allegory, an account of a soul's attempt to journey toward redemption. But the journey that McCarthy narrates does not take place in another world, but rather in this one, and Culla is forced at every turn to reckon with the limitations and burdens placed on him by virtue of his place in this cosmos. As his surname ironically suggests, Culla Holme may be in this world, but he is not at home here.

Thus, there is possibly something else at work in McCarthy's employment of "outer darkness" in the novel's title, as well as in his development of the image throughout. As Luce notes, in gnostic thought, the phrase 'outer dark' designated "the realm of the cosmos, removed from the Unknown Father, the 'King of Light' whose realm is absolute light unmingled with darkness" (Luce *Reading* 72). In his discussion of an early gnostic text, the *Pistis Sophia*, Hans Jonas points out that the phrase "outer darkness" refers to the chaotic, evil principle that is the ruler of this world (116). Later, in his treatment of Valentinian gnosticism, he says of the "Lower Sophia" or the earthbound soul that has been consigned to a material state:

Having become conscious through the formation imparted by Christos, the deserted Sophia impetuously sets out to seek after the vanished light, but cannot reach it, for the Limit obstructs her forward rush. She cannot penetrate through him, because of her

admixture of the original Passion, and forced to remain alone in the outer darkness she falls prey to every kind of suffering that exists.
(187)

This soul/wisdom, then, tries in vain to transcend its physical limitations in order to receive healing. It struggles against the world, yet remains alone in the darkness of the cosmos, and falls prey to various forms of suffering. Jonas' description could also serve as a summary of Culla's journey through the world of *Outer Dark*. The darkness through which he travels is neither wholly spiritual nor wholly physical but--as with the landscapes that the pilgrim encounters more positively--involves some unity of the two.

As evidenced throughout the novel, Culla's encounters with the physical world around him are--in dramatic contrast to those experienced by Berry's characters such as Burley Coulter and Danny Branch--profoundly discordant and fragmented. Instead of wonder, hospitality and abundance, this world holds for Culla dread, restlessness, and scarcity. Early in the novel, nature presents itself to Culla as a horrifying tableau in which fecundity is not nourishing but rather menacing. As he embarks into the woods to abandon his newborn son, Culla witnesses a heron exploding slowly and rising before him "with an immense and labored wingbeat" (16). The ground holds moss of "a fiery nitric green," and "everywhere beneath a sparse cover of trees a coppery haze quiver[s] like some rare dust in the twilight" (16). When night falls, Culla's sense of unease intensifies, as "long and cool through the woods about him a spectral quietude set in. As if something were about that crickets and nightbirds held in dread" (16). These descriptions stand in marked contrast to the "dark-mystified woods" of

Berry's "Fidelity." Culla is wandering in an unfriendly world, and the foreboding terror that permeates the scene offers a foretaste of the journey that awaits him throughout the narrative.

Likewise, imagery of water is abundant in this novel, and also carries with it a certain amount of dread. As Luce notes, water in various states--whether a raging flood or a boggy swamp--served in gnostic myth to represent either the chaos or the stagnation that defined life in the cosmos. Both kinds of water are present in *Outer Dark*, and both present themselves as problematic for Culla. Thus, after leaving the child to die in the woods, Culla comes to a creek which he will have to cross. The manner in which McCarthy describes Culla's encounter is rife with an uncanny sort of dis-ease:

He stopped, his breath roaring, trying to listen. Very far away lightning quaked once, again, soundlessly. The current moved dimly about him. He spat. His saliva bloomed palely on the water and wheeled and slid inexplicably upstream, back the way he had come. He turned and watched it in disbelief. He plunged his arm into the water. It seemed motionless. He spat again, and again the spittle flared and trembled and listed perverse. He surged from the water and began to run in the return direction and at a demented pace through the brush and swamp growth, falling, rising, going on again. (17)

If the creek, in its inexplicable movements, is engaging Culla, even communicating with him, this fact brings him no comfort. He wants nothing more than to escape the cold and oppressive flow of the creek as quickly as possible.

Later in the novel, as Culla attempts to continue his journey by ferry, he encounters water in a much more imposing form, as a river swell floods the vessel and threatens finally to destroy Culla and bring his journey to an end. According to Luce, this is the “most authentically gnostic image” of water in the novel, depicting the water as a representation of the cosmic chaos that would destroy and consume humanity in darkness (*Reading* 186-187). And of course, there is the swamp that Culla encounters at the novel’s end, the “spectral waste...a faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth’s curve (242).” When Culla attempts to set his foot in the swamp, “it rose in a vulvate welt claggy and sucking,” leaving him to wonder “why a road should come to such a place” (242), perhaps an acknowledgment that, despite his best attempts to escape the imprisoning evil of the world, such attempts are ultimately ill-advised and futile.

Within this context, even Culla’s seemingly benign actions become, in McCarthy’s vernacular, displays of animosity toward the earth, perhaps the outgrowth of his alienation. Where wonder is replaced by dread, the oppressed, alien spirit reacts violently. Thus, when Culla sinks an axe into the earth, and then takes it up again to “hack at the ground with crazed industry,”(24) the reader senses that Culla’s frustration is beginning to manifest itself in violence against his surroundings. Likewise when he sits on a stump and carves at it intently with a knife (26). Such an action could be dismissed as absentminded habit, but in a context of moral exile, it assumes a new significance. As Luce remarks, this enmity between humans and their surroundings is an important feature of gnostic ecology:

In the gnostic view, humanity shared with other natural creatures an origin in darkness and subjection to physical *heimarmene*, yet this common nature did not ameliorate the fact that both humankind and the natural world, subject to necessity, were agents of oppression to one another. (*Reading* 113)

As opposed to the Christian ecology that would seek reconciliation within the context of nature, the gnostic view, which appears to shape Culla's response, would attempt to find healing by fleeing from the darkness of the woods, or lashing out in childish hostility toward his surroundings.³⁷

Thus, in contrast with the kind of communion that the pilgrim enjoys with nature, Culla's place in the world is one defined by struggle and restlessness. Instead of encountering the kind of abundance that in Berry's novels results from a hospitable and careful communion with the earth, Culla meets with scarcity and starvation that intensifies as his journey progresses. The act of acquiring food becomes for Culla an all-consuming task. Whether illustrating the difficulty of purchasing cheese and crackers (38-39), making a meal of stale, moldy cornbread (27), or chewing on dry corn with "a grim rotary motion of his jaws," (132) McCarthy presents Culla as a man locked in a bitter struggle with the problem of sustenance. Consequently, hunger is a force almost as palpable as evil in this novel. As Culla works a series of menial jobs, most of which he never receives payment for (Guillemin *The Pastoral Vision* 63), his emptiness grows, so that at one point McCarthy relates that Culla was "beginning to feel lightheaded and his empty belly had drawn up in him like a fist" (145). Other characters in the novel experience similar struggles—the housewife whose freshly churned butter

goes to waste because of her husband's rage (108), the hog drovers who lose their herd of swine over a cliff (218-219)—evidencing Rinthy's observation that "Times is hard" (192). Yet none of the novel's characters seem to struggle against hunger and scarcity as Culla does. The final blow to Culla's ability to satisfy his hunger comes in the campfire scene, where he accepts from the Trinity of murderers a piece of human flesh and chews it mechanically while it swells in his mouth and takes on "a pulpy feel warped and run with unassailable fibers" (172). In this horrifying episode McCarthy depicts the frustrated culmination of Culla's pursuit of meaningful and life-giving work. Unable to feed himself by means of his labor, he has become a cannibal, physically and spiritually linked to the novel's primary images of savagery, eating not just by the sweat of his brow, but by the ever-increasing darkness in his heart. Because his hostility toward the world is met with a lack of hospitality, his efforts to sustain himself are frustrated and ultimately defeated; and with them, his humanity and any possibility for redemption.

In his presentation of Culla Holme, McCarthy engages a mixture of biblical imagery and gnostic symbolism to depict the flight of this character from his sin as neither wholly spiritual nor wholly physical. If the journey of a pilgrim takes place in the physical world, and if the pilgrim attends carefully and lovingly to his surroundings even as he journeys toward the sacred, it is because he understands that this world, far from being inherently corrupt, actually and necessarily provides a context in which holiness is encountered and learned. Culla's journey also takes place in the natural world, but it is a journey that seeks only escape: escape from the past, escape from guilt, escape from limitations. As

such, it is a journey marked with hostility toward the natural world and one that is met with animosity and oppression from every other creature--living and non-living--that he encounters. If Burley Coulter's and Danny Branch's relationship to nature was in some sense a reflection of their spiritual state, so that the peace and fulfillment they experienced could be interwoven with the physical sustenance and the feeling of being at home in the world that they enjoyed, it is clear that Culla's experience depicts the inverse situation. Culla finds no peace within McCarthy's novel; likewise, his hunger is never fed. As he is at war with himself and his guilt, he is also at war with the cosmos in which he lives and through which he travels. In this way, McCarthy presents Culla as an anti-pilgrim who will never be at home in this world, and whose flight will only end in frustration.

CONCLUSION

As human beings move through the world, they are forced to confront the limitations that life in this world entails. They can choose to flee, so that their journey through life involves a constant attempt to transcend their place within the created order, a constant resistance of the notion that they might share something with the creatures that surround them. Or, conversely, they can choose to make their home, in the words of Burley Coulter, "Right here," not resisting the impulse to move, not wallowing in stagnation, nor denying the conviction that there is a possibility of another life beyond this one, yet understanding that the journey through the world can be a context of wonder as well as a context of growth. They can embrace the notion that the concrete and particular places they inhabit can be spaces of worship, in which the task of

learning what it means to be human and to have a relationship with the land and with other creatures as fellow members of creation, is a spiritual discipline. Several of Wendell Berry's characters do embrace that way of life, and do learn that discipline, during their time in the world. Two particularly powerful examples of this are presented in Burley Coulter and Danny Branch. These two men demonstrate the pilgrim vocation in the ways that they inhabit the world, in the ways that they move through the world, and in the ways that they share in the life of the world, presenting to readers what lives of reconciliation, rather than estrangement toward the world, might look like.

Conversely, the existence of Culla Holme, the protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's novel *Outer Dark*, is defined by flight. As he flees from his sin and his shame, he embodies estrangement from the natural world by evincing hostility toward his surroundings. Consequently, he is never able to be at home, no matter where he travels. He is never able to find sustenance, no matter how hard he works. And most significantly, he is never able to find peace within a world that he regards, not with awe or wonder, but rather with terror and contempt. As such, he provides a powerful example of the anti-pilgrim, and demonstrates for readers the consequences of opposing oneself to the created order.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant questions that any theology of spirituality must consider is that of how to approach the limitations that impose themselves upon human life. Are realities such as fleshly existence, human community with its numerous obligations, and one's place within the natural, created order seen as obstacles between the human soul and some transcendent plane? Or, conversely, might such realities be viewed, in Adam Cooper's words, as "the privileged point of divine activity" (4)? Nicholas Lash, with recourse to the work of Baron Von Hugel, posits the question as a distinction between exclusive and inclusive forms of mysticism (163). The former argues that in order to find union with God, or with the good, or to realize one's full potential as a human being, one must escape the material, fleshly, and structuring principles of this world via special rituals or formulas, or by abandoning the physical, social, and institutional structures of which one might be a part. Within this perspective, however, the estrangements which spirituality might otherwise seek to reconcile are exaggerated or aggravated, so that wholeness becomes difficult if not impossible. The latter suggests that it is precisely within the context of those realities, otherwise seen as limiting or burdensome, that the spiritual life necessarily unfolds. By embracing these realities, rather than despising them or fleeing from them, human beings might find some measure of healing regarding those rifts or cleavages that would otherwise define life.

As Rowan Williams has demonstrated, the divide within Christian spirituality on these matters has historically been described as the rift between various gnostic forms of Christianity and more traditionally orthodox versions of the faith, which have maintained a concrete focus on Christian doctrines of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection of the body, as statements about a God who is involved in the everyday realities of human history. Throughout this dissertation, I have chosen to represent the latter version of Christian spirituality--that advocated by thinkers like Lash and Williams--by developing a triad of spiritual vocation: priest, prophet, and pilgrim. Those who embody these vocations would provide models as to how inclusive mysticism might be applied to the rhythms and rituals of everyday life as most human beings experience it: in the flesh, among other people, in the midst of a created order to which they belong by virtue of God's design.

While theological explanations of these vocations are necessary, they are not, in my opinion, wholly adequate. One of the prominent features of historical, orthodox Christianity, in contrast to its gnostic counterparts, is a dependence on narratives to demonstrate how life is to be lived. This is not a quality unique to Christianity; numerous cultures throughout time have testified to the importance of stories in shaping human existence, but it is nonetheless integral to the Christian faith. And while one would never want to downplay or denigrate the special significance of the biblical narratives in presenting a vision of what the properly spiritual Christian life is supposed to be, I am not the first to argue that other, contemporary stories can also play an important role in inspiring and captivating the collective Christian imagination so that the question of how one

should live might be answered by fictional characters just as it is by historical and biblical ones.

For these reasons, the works of Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy are valuable to the task of spiritual theology. In their novels and short stories, through the characters that they create and the stories they tell, they confront the divide between abstract, transcendent spirituality and a more concrete, embodied approach to the spiritual life. As this dissertation has demonstrated, these authors have many qualities in common, including, broadly, a desire to explore religious faith and religious doubt as central themes in their works. More specifically, they treat realities such as the flesh, the community, and one's response to life in the created order as moral, religious, and spiritual issues. Moreover, the manner in which each of these authors approaches these matters consistently keeps in view the twin specters of dualism and gnosticism, either overtly rejecting or persistently engaging the ideologies, symbols and belief systems of dualistic spiritualities.

Early in their lives, both Berry and McCarthy encountered a form of Christianity, and Christian spirituality, that they found wanting. Berry developed a disdain for the Protestantism of his childhood because of its gnostic, dualistic qualities: specifically, a hatred for the world that God allegedly loved. McCarthy rejected, on some level, the Catholicism in which he was baptized and raised. If a novel like *Suttree* can provide clues to McCarthy's reasons for leaving the church of his childhood, it appears that he regarded it as a dead institution, unable to feed lost souls, to provide comfort for the suffering, or to point the way to salvation for those who were searching. For both of these men, however, this

rejection of an early faith did not extinguish their interest in religion. They have both continued, over the course of careers that span a half-century, to puzzle out some of the religious questions that vexed them early in life.

For Berry, this meant coming to a new understanding of the Christianity that, in some versions, had seemed so anemic to him. Over time, he came to believe that the gnostic dualisms that had been so troubling to him were not integral to the Christian faith, but corruptions of it; he could thus remain a part of the Christian tradition that had shaped him. Indeed, he could be more faithful to that tradition while rejecting those elements that would cut him off from the world that he loved. While it seems that Berry still wrestles with his faith honestly and tenaciously, it is also evident that he has found in the Christian scriptures and in the Christian tradition some resources that have contributed to his worldview and also to the way he tells stories and creates characters to populate those stories. Rather than seeking to transcend creaturely limitations or to embrace a will-to-power in pursuit of the good, Berry's characters seek to fulfill their potential as human beings within the limiting contexts of human life, humbly and persistently seeking reconciliation with those elements from which human beings are estranged rather than attempting to escape them. Thus, as I have demonstrated, a number of his characters embody the possibilities illustrated in my triad of spiritual vocation, by living out, within their families and their communities, the roles of priest, prophet, and pilgrim.

As Dianne Luce has argued in her "intellectual biography," the scriptures, beliefs, and traditions that have influenced McCarthy's work most deeply have come from the systems of Manichaeism and Valentinian Gnosticism. Because

McCarthy is a notoriously reclusive author, and chooses to volunteer very little about his personal beliefs, it would be unwise to say that McCarthy is a gnostic, or that he advocates the dualistic philosophies that Berry so roundly rejects. However, what is far more evident to numerous readers of McCarthy's works and also more significant for the purposes of spiritual theology is that gnostic ideas and symbols are just as pervasive in his fictions as traditionally Christian forms of embodied spirituality are in Berry's. Whatever McCarthy's personal views might be, the perspectives of some of his most prominent characters are very clearly shaped by gnostic and dualistic understandings of the flesh, of community, and of the created world. His characters do not seek reconciliation or integration with the realities from which they are estranged--the flesh, human community, and the natural world. Rather, they either flee from these things or else attempt to subdue and control them, to bend them to their purposes. Their manner of perceiving their surroundings would be entirely familiar within systems of gnosticism which despise the material, the mundane, and the limiting, and value transcendence of one's creatureliness as the end toward which human beings are oriented. Thus many of McCarthy's most prominent characters embody distortions, or corruptions, of the figures in my triad. They are anti-priests, anti-prophets, and anti-pilgrims, demonstrating--either directly or indirectly--the results of dualistic, antimaterial, and gnostic perceptions of humanity's place in the world. Ultimately, rather than classifying McCarthy himself as a gnostic, a nihilist, or an inhumanist, I would say that the way that McCarthy depicts his characters actually shows the dangerous and destructive consequences of embracing such ways of life and thus might serve to warn readers against a quest to transcend their humanity.

While a number of Berry's characters evince the sort of embodied compassion that is essential to the spiritual vocation of the priesthood as I have defined it, two men in particular, Jack Beechum and Mat Feltner, demonstrate most clearly and most consistently what it looks like to be a priest, not as ordained ministers or professional members of the clergy, but rather as farmers and townspeople, as fathers and husbands and friends. While the professional ministers in Port William appear to those in need in moments of grief, their presence is one of detachment; their words are rote; their gestures are formulaic. And so, their ministries of compassion are ultimately ineffective, failing to make any real connection with the needs of those who are suffering. The roles that Jack and Mat embody are much more integrated into the lives of those around them, and so the fulfillment of their vocation is far more effective. Each of these men, at various points in the stories that Berry tells about them, exhibit towards those with whom they share life the kind of compassion that would actually compel one to share, not just in a spiritual sense, but also in an emotional and even physical sense, the burdens and blessings of fleshly life in this world. Both in moments of extreme grief and also those of intense joy, Jack and Mat are wholly present to those whom they love. They are able to communicate, not only with the words they say, but more often with some physical gesture--a gift offered, an embrace given, a look of approval--that life in the flesh is not only beautiful, it is also sacred.

From our earliest encounter with Jack, in the short story "Pray Without Ceasing," to the moment in the novel *The Memory of Old Jack*, in which Mat takes upon himself the important and holy task of serving as a guardian of Jack's

body following his death, each of these men demonstrates the significance of kenotic sacrifice and of embodied witness to a life of real compassion. For each of these men, the fulfillment of their vocation is fleshly because life is fleshly; neither Jack nor Mat sees life as any less sacred because of that fleshiness. In contrast to a gnostic perspective that understands the flesh as inherently sinful, something to be treated with contempt or, at best, tolerated with indifference, Jack and Mat understand, and help readers to understand, that moments of birth and death, and fleshly, one might even say erotic, beauty, are gifts of God, and that fleshly, human creatures, even in their vulnerability, carry around in their bodies the potential for holiness. The compassionate wisdom that both Jack and Mat demonstrate in their actions and their words is not new. As Berry states, it is ancient, passed on from one generation to the next; and while anyone can receive and exhibit such wisdom and such compassion, one is grateful for men like Jack and Mat who prove, by their ways of being in the world, that such a vocation is indeed holy.

The flesh plays an equally significant role in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy. However, very few if any of his characters understand fleshly existence as something to be revered. More often, his characters either exhibit shameful neglect toward the flesh, or a predatory impulse to consume and destroy the flesh of those around them. Among McCarthy's blood-soaked and cannibalistic characters, Lester Ballard, the ironically titular character whose story is told in McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, provides the most compelling example of what an anti-priest looks like. Unlike Jack Beechum and Mat Feltner, Lester does not receive schooling in the beautiful holiness of fleshly existence,

nor does he encounter many examples of embodied compassion. Instead, Lester wrestles from very early on in his life with the reality that fleshly life and fleshly death are messy and shameful. The memory of his father's suicide, and of the moment when he finds his father's corpse hanging like a piece of meat in a barn, undoubtedly haunts Lester, and the education that he receives in the degradations of sex, courtesy of the dumpkeeper, shape his perspectives on the erotic in profoundly problematic ways. Thus, Lester grows to evince an attitude toward fleshly existence that incorporates both shameful fascination and predatory lust. This leads him, as a young man, to a series of crimes against the flesh that are at the same time shockingly violent and strangely ritualistic. In his actions, Lester demonstrates a desire to consume the flesh of women and to manipulate the bodies of women toward his own ends and his own desires. As readers like Brian Evenson and Gary Ciuba have argued, Lester detaches himself from any sense of sympathy for or responsibility toward other human beings. In his overreaching, his attempts to become a sort of god, Lester never pauses to ask what he should do with a body; he only asks what he can do (Evenson 44). Thus, before he is finally caught, and before his body is sacrificed to make amends for his horrible crimes, Lester reaches a point of transcendence, in which he has become a "bloody godhead" (Ciuba 80), by means of destroying and manipulating the flesh of others. If there is anything special about the flesh for this character, it resides only in the way that power over the flesh satisfies--however temporarily--his dangerous desires. Thus, Lester Ballard provides readers with an unforgettable model of one who wreaks havoc on the world around him by seeking to transcend his own creatureliness in his exploitation of

the flesh of others. By the end of the novel, he is no longer satisfied to be a child of God; he wants to be a god and will destroy whomever he has to destroy in order to reach that status.

Among the most important themes in Berry's fiction is the significance of human community. The question that Berry asks in a 1987 essay, "Does Community Have a Value?" is answered emphatically in the affirmative in his narratives of the Port William membership. The community that Berry creates in his fictional works strives, across generations, to be a place where members--especially the most vulnerable members--are cared for. But in order for this community to remain true to such a difficult and demanding vision, it is necessary that there are voices who inspire them, who encourage them, who cast visions of what is possible and hold them to account when they forget or neglect those visions. This is the role of the prophet; as one who sees a capacity for sacredness within the realm of human community, and as one whose very existence is for the sake of his community, the prophet pushes that community toward justice, toward righteousness, toward a realization of what it means to embody goodness and truth--not just as individuals, but as a group.

The citizens of Port William have no greater prophetic advocates than Wheeler Catlett and his two sons, Henry and Andy. Each of these three men possess gifts not only to see visions, but also to communicate those visions in the here and now, in ways that motivate the members of their community toward something better. Each of these men, by virtue of their training, could undoubtedly leave the small community of Port William behind and pursue more lucrative job opportunities and more prestigious positions in distant places.

Wheeler and Henry both have the education necessary to practice law, and both have quick and capable legal minds that could certainly be put to use for some powerful or moneyed interest. Andy, likewise, as a journalist, has already proven capable of securing a job in a larger city, with a national publication. However, all three of these men desire something beyond what such a life can offer. All three of these men, at some point, have made commitments to be the voice of the voiceless, to use their imaginations, their skills, and their words, to secure a stable future for those who might otherwise be crushed by a world that is uncritically enamored by progress. Wheeler and Henry, then, have chosen to establish a law practice in Port William, and to devote their lives to fighting for the interests of the small farmer, preserving both their ways of life and the land which makes those ways possible. Andy has chosen to return to Port William to farm, to share life with the men and women there, and to tell their stories.

In the midst of a culture that urges them to abandon the obligations of community in order to pursue individual glory and individual goals, all three of these men use their gifts to pursue--and to help others pursue--something greater: righteousness, a just way of life among others, a vision of what a healthy community should be. This involves no small measure of sacrifice; as Berry shows, the decisions that confront these men are by no means easy, and they are fully aware of what they leave on the table in order to pursue visions of wholeness and health. But the vocation of the prophet is one of existing for the sake of the community, and the reward of the prophet--for those who can see it--is the knowledge that the lives of others are better because of the prophet's contribution, the awareness that the prophet is part of something, and is in some

sense a guardian of something, bigger than himself, something that stretches across generations, and will continue to stretch across generations. Most significant, the prophet evinces an understanding that the work he does on behalf of the community is in some sense sacred. While many people are tempted to see community, with its obligations and responsibilities, as burdensome, as an obstacle to realizing one's full potential, the prophet understands that he is nothing without his community. It is perfectly fitting that Berry's prophets often resort to religious language, and their visions often exhibit religious characteristics. Each of these men sees, in the community of which they are a part, something holy. They see themselves as part of a cloud of witnesses whose job it is to help preserve what is sacred and good in human community and to join with others to realize the purposes for which they were created.

In contrast with the Port William membership, the characters that Cormac McCarthy creates demonstrate, within the communities they form, not the potential for holiness or righteousness, but rather a terrifying capacity for destruction. Community, in McCarthy's narratives is usually depicted not as a force for making people better, or inspiring people toward goodness, but rather as an aggregation of violent, predatory, and rapacious individuals whose violence only grows in combination. Human communities in McCarthy's works differ from packs of wolves or swarms of locusts only in the ways they calculate and communicate their intent to destroy. Evident throughout most of McCarthy's works is the notion that the good must be found on one's own; to bind oneself to a community is to invite trouble. The only thing more problematic in McCarthy's fiction than a solitary, nomadic murderer like Lester Ballard is a group of nomadic

murderers such as the Glanton gang of *Blood Meridian*. But even a pack of wolves, it seems, must have a leader, someone who is responsible for casting a vision of what that group is capable of and then encouraging them to realize it. For the Glanton Gang of *Blood Meridian* that leader is Judge Holden. Like Wheeler and Henry Catlett, the Judge possesses a legal mind; he is well-versed in the various nuances of jurisprudence. Like Andy Catlett, the Judge has a way with words; he is an expert communicator, an engaging storyteller, and proficient at the kind of verbal gymnastics that leave his audiences in awe. In fact, as the characters in the novel repeatedly testify, the Judge is a man of prodigious talent in a number of areas. His mental, physical, and even spiritual prowess is unparalleled among McCarthy's characters.

Unlike Berry's prophetic trio, however, the Judge does not use his gifts and his skills on behalf of his community, and certainly not on behalf of the vulnerable in that community. While Abraham Heschel's notion that "the prophet is nothing without his people" holds as true for the Judge as it does for the Catletts, what the prophet seeks to gain from his community comes through manipulation and exploitation rather than sacrifice. In order for the Judge to be the Judge, he must gain control over a group of men and effectively bend them to his will. He must plant in their imaginations the seeds of his vision of the world: a world in which the strong rule over the weak, and in which men like him achieve through violence the ability to define righteousness and justice in their own terms. When the Judge confronts and destroys the kid at the end of the novel, his biggest complaint against the kid is that he has been too merciful, that in his unwillingness to destroy the weak and vulnerable he has betrayed the vision to

which he should have ascribed as part of the Judge's community. At the end of the novel, the Judge alone remains of that problematic community; having exhausted all their usefulness, he is free of any obligation or responsibility to others. There was never anything within his community worthy of concern, much less of reverence. And as he dances alone, in triumph, in the novel's closing paragraphs, he exhibits the qualities of one for whom the only value in community rests in the extent to which it might be exploited and manipulated. In his godlike existence, he transcends all those who surround him, and certainly all those who have crossed him in some way. In his will-to-power, and his desire to define the good and the just in ways that best suit his ends, the Judge, among all of McCarthy's characters, is the most convincing anti-prophet.

The third member of my triad, the pilgrim, is one who finds holiness within the created order; in contrast to the gnostic--who despises this world and longs only to escape it--the pilgrim, properly understood, finds sacred value in the time spent journeying through this world. The pilgrim has eyes to see glimpses of heaven within the cosmos, and sees life among other creatures not as a punishment but as a blessing. To borrow the words of one of Berry's most colorful characters, Burley Coulter, the pilgrim has a "knack for the here". Burley Coulter and his son Danny Branch, among a vast collection of characters who revere the natural world, provide the most significant examples of the pilgrim existence in all of Berry's fiction. This is not only due to the amount of time they spend outdoors; most of Berry's characters spend the majority of their waking hours in the fields. Rather, Burley and Danny are the characters most at home in the wild places surrounding Port William. According to Norman Wirzba, one of

the defining qualities of a proper theology of creation and creatureliness is hospitality, the sense that creation makes room for human beings and that human beings can inhabit that space gratefully and reverently. Burley and Danny, throughout most of their lives, evince this attitude toward the natural world.

Alone among Berry's characters, these two are able to enter into the "dark-mystified woods" and spend days there, not as tourists or as those seeking to escape everyday life, but as those who have incorporated the wildness of the woods and the mysteries of their surroundings into their lives. They most convincingly demonstrate what it is to be in communion with nature, to embody the kind of humility that is proper to humanity--that of valuing creation not because one stands to gain something from it, or because one can exploit it for his own purposes, but because reverence for other parts of creation is a part of realizing one's potential as a created being. Thus Burley and Danny are able to enter into the woods not as intruders or as enemies of what lives there, but as those who understand the capacity for sacredness that exists in those places, and as those who believe that God does not hold creation in contempt, but rather chooses to reveal God's self within the natural order.

These convictions are never more evident than in Berry's short story "Fidelity," which narrates the decision that Danny makes to abduct Burley from a hospital in Louisville so that Burley might die in some place more hospitable--specifically, the woods that have been his home for decades. The sense of wonder and reverence that is present on every page, coupled with the deep and abiding knowledge that both Burley and Danny have for the place to which they

have traveled, demonstrate vividly that for these two men, life in this world has not been a burden to be tolerated, but rather a context in which they encounter what is most real and what is most important. Burley's final moments, and the burial that follows, bear witness to the sense that both men share that God is not absent from this world, and that embracing one's surroundings is not an affront to God, but another means of worshiping that God and of fulfilling one's vocation as a human being.

As Dianne Luce has pointed out, the title of Cormac McCarthy's second novel, the Southern gothic parable *Outer Dark*, can be found both in the teachings of Jesus in the Christian gospels and in the gnostic Scriptures. In the former, it characterizes a place of punishment for those not fit for the kingdom of God. In the latter, it describes the world, the cosmos to which all human souls are sentenced, and from which all human souls seek release. Due to McCarthy's interest in gnostic texts and symbols, it is highly likely that the second usage was familiar to him. It is certainly an apt interpretation of the attitude displayed by Culla Holme, the novel's protagonist and an anti-pilgrim. This is a character whose sin has resulted in a profound sense of estrangement. He is cut off from everyone and everything around him, especially the world through which he journeys.

As he seeks to flee from the consequences of his sin, Culla encounters at every turn some ominous reminder that he is not at home in the cosmos. Animals shrink from him. Hunger consumes him. The sun torments him. Turbulent waters threaten to swallow him. Rather than understanding himself as one creature among many, and seeking reconciliation and communion with his surroundings,

Culla's movement is one of constant flight. Just as gnostic cosmologies posited the creation of the world as the result of sin, so that the natural order bears the marks not of a good God, but of an evil craftsman or a failed deity, Culla's relationship to the earth is one in which no measure of peace or hospitality or reverential wonder is on display, but only contempt, spite, and terror. Unlike Burley Coulter and Danny Branch, who were most at home in the "dark-mystified woods," Culla has no home in this world. Throughout the novel, he journeys toward a goal that he is unable ever to attain, and at novel's end, he reaches the end of a road only to find that it terminates in a boggy swamp. He turns around, and his futile flight continues. If the gnostic flight, the constant attempt to escape one's surroundings in the vague hope that a better world, one's true home, awaits, is the opposite of pilgrimage, in which not only is the destination sure but the journey provides a context for growth, then Culla Holme provides a powerful example of what an anti-pilgrim might look like.

In her 2007 interview with Cormac McCarthy, Oprah Winfrey responded to one of McCarthy's characteristically ambiguous answers by stating, "You're a different kind of writer" (*Oprah* June 5th, 2007). McCarthy is, indeed, a different kind of writer, as is his conversation partner in this dissertation, Wendell Berry. The two men are different in many ways from other writers, and they are different from each other. One of the characteristics that distinguishes the pair from many (but certainly not all) of their peers in American literature is their willingness to wrestle with deeply religious matters; in particular, they are distinguished by the ways that their work orbits and confronts the divide between gnostic forms and more earth-bound, embodied versions of the spiritual life. It is because of this

consistent exploration of different versions of transcending humanity that these two authors might have a word to say to spiritual theology; and it is because of this exploration that, for each of these men, writing itself becomes something of a spiritual vocation.

Directly or indirectly, intentionally or not, both Berry and McCarthy explore in their fiction some of the same tasks that the priest, the prophet, and the pilgrim have always engaged. By presenting readers with characters who value realities such as the flesh, human community, and the created order, and by setting these characters within an imperfect but ultimately healthy and life-sustaining place like Port William, Berry demonstrates what is possible. His argument for the holiness that can be found within the mundane and limiting contexts in which life unfolds is made powerfully and persistently, so that readers might understand what it means to be truly spiritual, in a way that embraces, rather than rejects, the world.

McCarthy, on the other hand, creates characters who despise the flesh, who fail at community life, and who set themselves in direct opposition to the natural world. In order to realize their potential, these characters assume, they must escape any mundane or material limitations. And what results from all their striving and struggling is a world in which estrangements are magnified, in which fragmentation is pervasive, and in which reconciliation is all but impossible. Thus, McCarthy's argument for finding beauty and even holiness within this world, rather than striving to transcend it--although it is a far more negative argument--is just as powerful and just as persuasive as Berry's.

In conclusion, then, Berry's and McCarthy's works present readers with a challenge to see things differently. With visions of both hope and doom, they

prophetically compel readers to abandon gnostic, dualistic ways of looking at the world. They inspire readers to embrace the contexts of creaturely limitation not as obstacles or prisons but as realities essential to the spiritual life, or the quest for the good. Finally, they call readers to embody the vocation of being human, not *sicut deus*, but *Imago Dei*, humans created in the image of God to embody holiness and compassion and justice and wonder in this world.

NOTES

1. My focus will primarily be on Christian theology and Christian spirituality. This is not because other traditions do not have strong commitments to theology or convictions about spirituality that take seriously the concepts and ideas that are central to my framework. However, Christian theology is the context in which I am the most comfortable, and to which I can speak most effectively. Furthermore, both Berry and McCarthy, while syncretistic in their thinking, have been most influenced by versions of Christian spirituality, and therefore that is the tradition most applicable to their work.

2. Some works that have proven most helpful in developing my framework are Williams' *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* and Lash's *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*.

3. See *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*.

4. For a fuller articulation of Tillich's notion of estrangement as something that stretches back to ancient times, see his *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2*. Chicago: University Press, 1957. 44-47.

5. Williams points, specifically, to the author of 1 John, who asserted that those who deny Jesus' coming in the flesh are antichrist, and also Irenaeus, who proclaimed in the second century that "the whole man has been called to realize the likeness of God...because the whole man is in need of healing".

6. See pages 11-12 above.

7. Lash speaks briefly, for example, about the impact of such spiritualities on Christian ways of being political, or Christian ways of doing economics, stating that they might become distorted parodies of real and faithful witness.

8. Italics mine.

9. See, in particular, Walter Brueggemann's work *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002 (2nd ed.) and Ellen Davis' recent *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

10. As Woodward points out, only the novel *Suttree*, with its troubled depiction of a father-son relationship, seems, among McCarthy's work, to be autobiographical in any way. Much later, however, McCarthy will be inspired by his own relationship to his young (second) son to write *The Road*.

11. Among the more direct and surprising critiques that Berry levels at large-scale movements of this sort is his essay "The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character" in which he challenges the Sierra Club for investing their endowment in corporations--such as Exxon and General Motors--that have terrible records of pollution and are thus directly opposed to the work that the environmental movement seeks to accomplish. The essay was published in the book *The Unsettling of America*, which was published by the Sierra Club.

12. Thus, Edwin Arnold, among the McCarthy critics perhaps the most inclined to read his works through the lens of Christianity, states, "I don't want to turn McCarthy into an overtly Christian writer...I suspect his own belief system embraces a larger and more pantheistic view." ("The Mosaic of McCarthy's

Fiction” in *Sacred Violence*, 17-23. 22. Ashley Woodwiss, a Wheaton College philosopher, proposed to Ragan Sutterfield in a 2006 *Christianity Today* article that Christian readers of Berry should adopt a more modest approach to appropriating his fiction, asking “What does Berry have to offer us in terms of imaginative possibilities that Christians can really buy into?” (quoted in Bonzo and Stevens, 181).

13. Jason Peters has also drawn parallels between the thought of Phillip Lee and that of Wendell Berry, in his essay “Education, Heresy, and the ‘Deadly Disease of the World’” in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*.

14. Italics Lee’s.

¹It is significant that the essay cited by Bonzo and Stevens (and published in Berry’s collection *Another Turn of the Crank*) was first delivered as a 1994 address to a conference on spirituality and healing.

15. Which may in fact be a projection of his psyche, an attempt on his part to imagine a community where there is none.

16. Brian Evenson’s article, “McCarthy’s Wanderers: Nomadology, Violence, and Open Country,” in the anthology *Sacred Violence*, provides an excellent account of the role that isolation and exile plays in McCarthy’s fiction.

17. John Sepich notes that the quote derives from Boehme’s *Six Theosophic Points*.

18. See Barbara Brickman, “Imposition and Resistance in *The Orchard Keeper*”; Edwin Arnold, “McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing*”; and Leo Daugherty, “Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy”.

19. See K. Wesley Berry, "The Lay of the Land in Cormac McCarthy's Appalachia".

20. It is significant that Berry provides--through Andy's description of his grandmother--clues to the priestly pattern of life which Margaret will attribute to Jack in her own narration of events. Thus, he finds her sitting still, the pain of her arthritis preventing any manual work. But Andy is convinced that her posture is one of prayer. Perhaps most profound is the simple statement Andy makes about Margaret's relationship to her loved ones: "If we were worried, she wanted to worry with us. It was her place, she said." (42-43)

21. Italics mine

22. See, especially, Girard's work *Violence and the Sacred*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

23. Ciuba rightly calls the rifle, which Lester has had since childhood, "totemic" (77). In a later description of Lester, McCarthy will include the detail that he is holding his rifle "between his knees" (139).

24. Perhaps there is some irony in the fact that Lester received what Mat Feltner so fervently desired for Jack Beechum: that a minister read a simple service.

25. In her reading of the story *The Wild Birds*, Goodrich rightly illustrates the struggle that sometimes marks Wheeler's engagement with the law, because he is a man who is most comfortable with the letter of the law, a man who favors an orderly handing down, yet he operates in a world where the letter of the law does not always approach the measure of righteousness or justice that Wheeler strives to uphold. The ability to compromise, while perhaps not always at the top

of a list of qualities we ascribe to a prophet, is nonetheless necessary for a prophetic lawyer like Wheeler.

26. These scenes might mirror experiences in Berry's own early career, when he existed as a man between two worlds--his farm in Port Royal and his office at the University of Kentucky.

27. The language of Kingdoms and Economies is not only biblical and theological in nature, but also derives from Berry's usage, in his 1987 essay "Two Economies," published in the collection *Home Economics*. In the essay, Berry relates a conversation with his friend Wes Jackson, in which Jackson makes a claim that Berry terms "indispensable": the claim that the only economy comprehensive enough to discuss matters of real importance (such as the ruination of land) is the economy of "The Kingdom of God".

28. Note the echoes of Genesis 1. This desire to catalog living creatures in order to possess or rule over them seems to apply to other men as well, as in Holden's practice of sketching the portraits of his companions in his notebook.

29. See "Making it Home," and *Hannah Coulter*.

30. Despite what his mother might think, Burley's outsized personality, and the boisterous amusement he consistently provides to those who know him, is not actually irreligious, especially in the context of pilgrimage. One feature often shared by accounts of pilgrimage throughout history--including the literary accounts--is a sense of humor. While more allegorical renderings of "pilgrimage," those that envision pilgrimage as the journey to heaven (such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) are often dour, works like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in particular, are notable for the way they effectively and humorously blend the

sacred and the secular, the holy and the irreverent. Victor and Edith Turner also call attention to this aspect of pilgrimage in their chapter, "Pilgrimage as a Liminoid Phenomenon" (*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 37.)

31. That is, humility in the sense that Wirzba explores, characterized by a willing acknowledgment of humanity's fundamental connection with the *humus*, the soil, the earth. See *The Paradise of God*, 9-10.

32. King James Version. Other translations use, for "children of the kingdom," "Sons of the kingdom" (New American Standard) and "Subjects of the Kingdom" (New International Version); all three terms seem to be used in a pejorative sense.

33. King James Version.

34. King James Version.

35. Nell Sullivan, among others, has noted the contrast between Culla's experiences in the novel and Rinthy's journey. Because Rinthy, unlike her brother, is able to acknowledge her sin, and even spends the novel (albeit futilely) searching for the child whom she (correctly) believes is alive, Rinthy is able to experience some measure of peace at novel's end. Her interactions with other people, with the natural world, and with herself, are not run through with the same violence as those of her brother. See Sullivan, "The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*," 72. John Grammer, significantly, reads the unholy Trinity, journeying across the landscape with farming implements in hand, as parodies of the pastoral tradition that McCarthy was consciously attempting to interrogate and reject in his own work. See Grammer,

"A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's *South*," 35.

36. Luce characterizes the wastefulness of the snakehunter that Culla encounters later in the novel, and his attitude of "demented enthusiasm" toward the destruction of the snakes, as representative of the Judaeo-Christian view of humanity's dominion over nature, the view which has been called into question not only by non-Christian critics (as Luce acknowledges) but also by critics speaking from within the Christian tradition (like Berry and Wirzba). If Luce is correct, it would intimate that McCarthy's view of the Christian perspective on creation, like Berry's earlier view, groups Christianity with gnosticism as an anti-cosmic system.

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Education

Ph.D. Humanities, University of Louisville 2007-Present

M.Div., Princeton Theological Seminary 2004

B.A. English/Humanities, Milligan College 2000

Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Oxford, England 1998

Georgetown College 1996-1997

Areas of Specialization

Religion and Literature, Twentieth Century Literature, Medieval and Renaissance Literature and Culture, Composition, Religion and the Arts

Areas of Competency

Southern Literature, Modernism and Postmodernism, Literary/Critical Theory

Professional Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Louisville Humanities Department
2007-Present; Courses Taught: Introduction to World Literature,
Introduction to World Religions

Instructor, Louisville Bible College 2005-2007; Courses Taught: Literature of C.S. Lewis, Composition and Grammar, American Church History

Tutor, Princeton Theological Seminary Writing Center 2001-2003

Writing Tutor, Georgetown College 1996-1997

Publications

"Imagination as a Fruit of the Spirit in the Life and Theology of C.S. Lewis."

Book Chapter, *Doors in the Air: C.S. Lewis and the Imaginative World* Fall 2010

"Prospero's Exile and the Tempest of the English Reformation."
Religion and the Arts Spring 2010

"The Jesus Fish: Evolution of a Cultural Icon."
Studies in Popular Culture Spring 2010

"The Ambivalence of Pilgrimage in Marilyn Nelson's Cachoeira Tales."
REA: A Journal of Religion, Education, and the Arts December 2009

"Praying for a Change."
Christian Reflection Summer 2009

"Mourning with those who Mourn: Common Grief in Wendell Berry's *A Place on Earth*."
Everyday Journal 1.3 August 2008

"Learning Life-giving Ways of Life."
Christian Reflection Spring 2007

"Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail and Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion."
Book Review in *Stone-Campbell Journal* 8.2 Fall 2005

"Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy."
Book Review in *Stone-Campbell Journal* 8.1 Spring 2005

Forthcoming/Commissioned Publications

"Do You Think God Loves Football?": The Varieties of Religious Experience in Dillon." Book Chapter, *Clear Eyes, Full Hearts: Friday Night Lights*.

Publications Under Consideration

"Sin and the South: Cormac McCarthy's Outer Dark and the Fall of Humanity."
Submitted to *Studies in American Culture*

"Uncommon Kinship: The Mysticism, Poetry, and Politics of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov." Submitted to *Interdisciplinary Humanities*.

Conference Presentations

"The Comforts of Apocalyptic in Contemporary Fiction"
Humanities Education and Research Association National Conference,
San Francisco, CA, Spring 2011

"Genre Confusion and Ethical Orientation in Chaucer's Friar's Tale"
Conference of Christianity and Literature, SE Regional Meeting,
Montreat, NC Spring 2010

"Prospero's Exile: A Sacramental-Historical Reading of *The Tempest*."
New College Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies,
Sarasota FL Spring 2010

"Sin and the South: Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* and the Fall of Humanity."
Humanities Education and Research Association Conference
Chicago, IL Spring 2009

"Narrative and Tragedy in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*."
Conference of Christianity and Literature, SE Regional Meeting,
Chattanooga, TN Spring 2009

"Cinematic Yoder: The Phenomenology of the Moral Life and Contemporary
Film." John Howard Yoder and the Stone-Campbell Churches Conference,
Indianapolis, IN Spring 2009

"Right and Left in a Decentered World: Stephen Colbert, Stuff White People Like,
and the Politics of Play." Kentucky Philological Association Conference,
Owensboro, KY, Spring 2009

"The Jesus Fish: Evolution of a Cultural Icon."
Popular Culture Association of the South/American Culture Association of
the South Conference, Louisville, KY Fall 2008

"Growing Christians Locally: Theology and Community in the Stone-Campbell
Tradition." Stone-Campbell Journal Conference,
Cincinnati, OH Spring 2008

"Uncommon Kinship: Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and the Poetics of
Pilgrimage." University of Louisville Humanities Colloquium,
Louisville, KY Spring 2008

"Waiting for Odette: Romantic Longing and Religious Exile in *Swann's Way*."
Society for the Interdisciplinary Studies of Social Imagery Conference,
Colorado Springs, CO Spring 2008

Awards and Honors

Daub-Maher Award for Outstanding Paper, Southeastern Conference on
Christianity and Literature 2009

University of Louisville Faculty Favorites Award for Excellence in Teaching 2009

Graduate Teaching Assistantship, University of Louisville 2007-Present

Seminary Fellowship, Princeton Theological Seminary 2001

Valedictorian, Milligan College 2000

English Award, Milligan College 2000

Underclassman Philosophy Award, Georgetown College 1997

Freshman Writing Award, Georgetown College 1997

Kentucky Collegiate Journalism Association, Second Place Arts Writing 1997

Internships/Assistantships

Research Assistantship under Dr. Charles Bartow, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2004

Christian Education Internship, Supplee Memorial Presbyterian Church, Willow Grove, PA, 2002-2003

Summer Internship, A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, Denali National Park, AK, Summer 2002

REACH Internship, Christian Missionary Fellowship, Ethiopia, Summer 1998

Academic Service

Session Chair, Humanities Education and Research Association National Conference San Francisco, CA Spring 2011

Session Chair, Conference on Literature and Culture after 1900, Louisville, Kentucky, Spring 2011

Humanities Graduate Student Conference Planning Committee, University of Louisville, Spring 2011

Presenter, Graduate Student Publication Workshop, University of Louisville, Spring 2010

Humanities Graduate Student Conference Planning Committee, University of Louisville, Spring 2010

Incoming Graduate Student Mentor, University of Louisville Humanities Department, 2009-2010

Session Chair, Popular Culture Association of the South/American Culture Association of the South Annual Conference, Louisville, Kentucky, October 2008

Faculty Team Accreditation Interviews, Association for Biblical Higher Education Louisville Bible College 2006

Professional and Academic Organizations

Association of Humanities Academics, University of Louisville, 2009-Present

Humanities Education and Research Association, 2009-Present

Conference on Christianity and Literature, 2009-Present

Seminarians for Social Change, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2001-2003

Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Association, Milligan College, 1999-2000

Editorial Board, Phoenix Literary Magazine, Milligan College, 1999-2000

Georgetownian Newspaper, Georgetown College, 1996-1997

Languages

Teaching Experience: Latin

Basic Reading/Research Competency: New Testament Greek, Biblical Hebrew, German

Relevant Volunteer Experience

GED Tutor, Necole's Place Community Center, Louisville, KY, 2004-2006

GED Tutor, Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, Trenton, NJ, 2001-2003

Young Life Urban Ministry, Student Leader, Louisville KY, 2000-2001

ESL Tutor, Locust Street Church of Christ, Johnson City, TN, 1999-2000

Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Johnson City, TN, 1999-2000