The Myth of Disenchantment: Religion and the Environment in Contemporary American Literature

by

Douglas James Sikkema

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EXAMINING COMMITTEE

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	Dr. Christopher Douglas Professor of English, University of Victoria
Internal Examiner	Dr. Scott Kline Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Waterloo
Supervisor	Dr. Chad Wriglesworth Associate Professor of English, St. Jerome's University
Internal Member	Dr. Andrew McMurry Professor of English, University of Waterloo
Internal Member	Dr. Kevin McGuirk Associate Professor of English, University of Waterloo

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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ABSTRACT

In the following project, I look closely at three living American writers whose work explores the important relations between the religious and ecocritical "turns" in American literature, with particular attention to ways religious belief might inform human understandings and interaction with the material world.

The opening chapter explores the ways that the human-nature relationship is configured in a post-Enlightenment "secular" age that has given rise to the current Anthropocene era. Alongside Charles Taylor, I argue that the secular age is funded by a narrative, or lived "myth," of disenchantment that has left many ill-at-ease with the ongoing destruction of the natural world. This uneasiness has led many to envision new "myths," or narratives, of re-enchantment along a host of postsecular lines. The postsecular options under investigation in this project are particularly those that return to religious claims in general, and confessional Christian claims in particular.

In this context, I look closely at variations of postsecular Christian myths of re-enchantment on offer in contemporary American poetry and prose through three writers: Christian Wiman, Marilynne Robinson, and Wendell Berry. I argue that each of these writers has articulated a confessionally Christian narrative of re-enchantment that challenges dominant forms of secularism while also taking issue with other-worldly, disembodied forms of Christianity that exhibit a low view of the material world. The choice of these authors and their arrangement in this project is not to suggest a clear aesthetic movement in contemporary American writing, but rather it is to note subtle progression in how the myth of disenchantment is challenged and myths of re-enchantment envisioned through postsecular forms of Christianity.

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For Vanessa,

Eli, Avery, Jackson, and Samuel.

With all my love

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PREFACE

Growing up in Southern Ontario in the Niagara region within a largely Christian, largely conservative, largely agrarian community, I experienced the environmental movement as something often associated with leftist politics, Buddhist/pantheist spiritualities, or socialist economics—all of which were highly suspect. How we were to relate to the earth—or, rather, the creation—was talked about in church on Sundays in abstract, theological language about stewardship as mandated in Genesis, or by interpreting nature as the "second book" of God's self-revelation. That the Bible talked about the natural world was clear, but how—or *if*—it impacted our actual practices in Vineland, Ontario, in the twentieth century remained unarticulated and, to me at least, unclear.

In retrospect, I realize that the Christian community of my youth rarely, if ever, addressed the methods of our farming community—one which largely relied on heavy pesticide and insecticide use, industrialized farming technologies, and chemical fertilizers. Waterways could be contaminated and the air made toxic by our practices, and even when increasing numbers of our community were diagnosed with infertility or lymphoma cancers (termed "farmer's cancer" by local doctors) many in the community continued to deride environmentalists for their progressive political bent, so-called socialist economic assumptions, and misguided, pagan spiritualities of the earth. We did not see ourselves as culpable for what was happening to the ecosystem we inhabited, nor did we see our religion as a resource that had much in the way of offering practical advice for how we might imagine the world and our place in it differently.

What, if anything I wondered, did our religion have to say about our responsibilities to *this* environment, to *this* place?

When I started graduate school at the University of Ottawa, I was introduced to Wendell Berry through his novel *Jayber Crow* and guided through it by a wonderful scholar and teacher, Dr. Dominic Manganiello. Wendell Berry, I learned, is a Kentucky poet and farmer who from the late-1960s until today has created a large body of poetry, essays, and fiction about his small town of Port Royal, Kentucky (although the fictionalized version is Port William). Even though rural Niagara and rural Kentucky are very different regions geographically, socially, and historically, there was something in Berry's writing that resonated with my own experiences of small-town Ontario. I began reading everything Berry wrote, and soon found that his rural experience is, in many ways, quite similar to mine. Moreover, he writes explicitly as a Christian who is uneasy with cultural expressions of Christianity that are often naïve and complicit with (even participating in) the destruction of the world.

Remaining in the tradition of Christian faith, Berry is nevertheless critical of Christian gazes fixed on some abstract paradise "beyond" this world and recognizes that such forms of religion pay no attention to—and thus give no proper or responsible affection for—the material, embodied, carnal life of particular places by particular people in particular times. In one of his Sabbath poems, "How to be a Poet," Berry advises poets of the land, and "to remind himself," that "There are no unsacred places; / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places."[1] Berry's words struck a chord, debunking my unarticulated assumption that restoration of the environment was something taking place elsewhere or, more likely, in another future time (likely when God came back to restore the creation to himself). Berry's words, however, were profound

[1] Wendell Berry, "How to be a Poet," *Given: Poems* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 18.

in their simple practicality. There are no holier, more sacred places than others. Port Royal, Kentucky or Vineland, Ontario are both intrinsically sacred with or without human use. As I would discover (and as this project explores) this insight is inextricably linked to Berry's understanding that the world, all of it, is God's ongoing creative utterance. Vineland or Port Royal or any place for that matter are equally capable of being loved and revered and served well, or of being dishonoured, ignored, abused, and desecrated.

I continue to be intrigued by ways Berry manages to be both critical *and* respectful of the religious tradition in which he continues to identify. He draws deeply from the wells of historic Christian teaching (in addition to other religions and schools of thought) in order to challenge destructive ecological, economic, and technological practices that damage the earth. By turning to the past, Berry's writing affirms that Christianity has *this-wordly* implications for the present. And Berry is not alone in this. A recent trend in contemporary American literature that I explore in this project is the persistent attempt to articulate this-worldly theological visions that challenge Christians focused too narrowly on some form of life *beyond* material reality while also speaking to the concerns of many secular skeptics who seem convinced that Christianity (or any religion) is not equipped to address ecological concerns. Both groups, I maintain, have been conditioned by a post-Enlightenment secularism that has often exacerbated their differences and cultivated tension and conflict.

The rise of what I am calling this-worldly theological visions in contemporary American literature, of which Berry's work is just one manifestation, is perhaps fitting for an age that has been deemed "secular" by sociologists, philosophers, and theologians alike.[2] In some ways, the

[2] In the first chapter I will unpack this more closely, looking primarily at the work of philosopher Charles Taylor whose magnum opus, *A Secular Age* (2007), helpfully unpacks various strands of secularization theory while also making a unique and significant offering to secularism theories. As will become evident, I think Taylor's work

secular has always signified this-worldly concerns. *Secular*, in its etymological roots in Latin, comes from *saeculum* which in Antiquity simply meant "of a generation, belonging to an age."[3] The *saeculum* was, at first, a mere demarcation of the time it took for one generation to live and die, which was between 90 and 100 years.[4] During the Christian Middle Ages, however, the meaning of *saeculum* shifted significantly in order to distinguish between a temporal, worldly realm of creaturely affairs and the eternal realm of the creator God that existed beyond the world of time and change.[5] The *secular*, therefore, began to connote this-wordly affairs in contradistinction to the otherworldly affairs of the church and (primarily Christian) religion. This shift did not necessarily entail conflict. In fact, that the church is not concerned with issues like poverty, oppression, and injustice in *this* world, would confound many in the Medieval and the Modern church alike. However, the premodern demarcation of "secular" and "sacred" spheres helped give rise to a post-Enlightenment, secular society that was increasingly suspicious—if not outrightly dubious—of the usefulness of religion and belief for the affairs of this world.

Today, when there is talk about the "rise of secular*ism*" or "secularization," it is often done so in this post-Enlightenment context where the polarity between *secular* concerns with this world and the ecclesial concerns of some eternal, other world are often perceived to be not merely distinct, but severed from one another. Indeed, the conflict between religion and science, faith and reason has become a hallmark of secularization according to most mainstream theorists. In the recent *Oxford Handbook on Secularism,* for instance, editors Philip Zuckerman and John Shook note five forms of modern secularism: political, economic, educational, scientific, and

helps clarify the current cultural moment and, for this project in particular, illuminates how the secular age has shaped and given rise to "this-worldly" theological visions in contemporary American literature.

[3] Phil Zuckerman and John Shook, "Introduction," *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid, 5

ethical. It is not necessary to unpack all of these, but the descriptions of each form of secularism is indicative of the pattern of conflict supposed to exist between each of these spheres and religion. For example, they write that political secularism champions a government "independent of religion"; educational secularism demands that education be "free of indoctrination and proselytizing"; and ethical secularism wants a "scientific explanation of morality."[6] These forms of secularism occur alongside consistent rhetorical and polemical attacks on religion in the hope of diminishing religion's influence on public, *secular* life. Religion, such rhetoric suggests, has no place for shaping the concerns of this world. In its more strident forms, this particular narrative around secularization—whether bemoaned or lauded—expects an eclipse of faith as the world modernizes and progresses or, according to another take on the same phenomenon, it declines into irreligious licentiousness.

Yet what confounds secularization theorists is the persistence of religious beliefs as the world modernizes. In fact, the past half century has given rise to sociological research that consistently bears out the fact that people in the globalized Western world today are hardly free from religious beliefs of some sort. A national survey conducted out of Baylor University, for instance, noted that 81 percent of American respondents believe in angels, 68 percent in Demons.[7] A Gallup poll in 2011 revealed that 92 percent of Americans still believe in God.[8] And a 2013 survey by the think tank Theos revealed that 77 percent [of Britons] believe that there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means."[9] And in the *World Values Survey* of 2014, which "represents approximately two-thirds of the world's adult

[6] Ibid, 11 – 12.

[7] Baylor University, "The Baylor Religion Survey, Wave 1," (Waco: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion 2005).

[8] Frank Newport, "More than 9 in 10 Americans Continue to Believe in God," *Gallup News Service*, 2011.

[9] "The Spirit of Things Unseen: Belief in Post-Religious Britain," *Theos* (2013), 7. Accessed Summer 2020, https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Reports/Spirit%20of%20Things%20-%20Digital%20(update).pdf

population,"[10] researcher Ariela Keysar notes the remarkable finding that across the world the vast majority of adults are still overwhelmingly religious.[11]

Religious and non-religious adults are almost evenly split worldwide with 53 percent defining themselves as religious, 33 percent as nonreligious, and 11 percent as atheists. However, if we look at the religious composition of countries around the world without China, which dominates with its sheer population size and large nonreligious segment, the religious population rises remarkably to 71 percent while the share of nonreligious drops to 22 percent and atheists are estimated as comprising only 4.2 percent.[12] Keysar's analysis of the *World Values Survey* is worth digging into more fully; however, for my purposes, it simply reveals that religious belief today is ongoing in the supposedly secularizing times in which we live.

What intrigues me, as a literary scholar, is identifying within contemporary American literature the peculiar tenor and thrust of such religious belief—Christianity in particular—as it is manifest in the creative expressions of poets, novelists, and essayists. If we have not done away with religion as some secularization theorists predicted and the polling data suggest, has the way belief is expressed and understood changed? In contemporary American literature, there are signs it has. In the fraught space of belief and doubt that characterize the secular age, writers who still maintain some confessional stance as Christians often figure Christianity distinctly as a this-worldly religion. More intriguing for my particular project is that in terms of how they figure material reality, such writers stress that matter is charged—indeed, *enchanted*—with the ongoing presence of its Creator. Such figurations challenge otherworldly manifestations of Christianity

[10] Ariela Keysar, "Religious/Nonreligious Demography and Religion Versus Science: A Global Perspective," *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism,* Eds. Philip Zuckerman and John Shook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 40.

[11] For the purposes of the study here, Keysar notes that "religious" people are those who "attend religious services." See Keysar, 41.

[12] Ibid, 42.

beholden to Enlightenment thought as well as the materialism of secular skeptics dubious that religious belief might add anything of benefit to our understanding and perception of this material world.

This story of secular skepticism towards belief is well told by historians, cultural theorists, and sociologists. What is less well known is that the Enlightenment and, later, even the "new" science were made possible by shifts *within* Christian theology. In my opening chapter I will explore some of the deeper Christian roots to the Enlightenment since they help to contextualize the particular projects of the contemporary American writers who are the focus of my study. Understanding some of the theological underpinnings of modern thought and practice reveals how shifts within Christian theology as manifested in American literature might still be considered with seriousness in a secular context that might remain dubious of religious discourse.

In recent literary criticism, understanding how belief has shifted in the secular age has garnered increased attention. A few recent scholars of American literature have put their finger on this pulse. Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* makes a compelling case that belief never went away in the secular age, but as one reads contemporary literature one realizes "how our ways of speaking both about religion and about literature have become elliptical" in the sense that authors are consistently attempting to "present us with logical and imaginative structures that bridge the gaps between conviction and relativism, doctrine and pluralism, belief and meaninglessness."[13] Hungerford's work, to which I will return throughout this project, is important for thinking about how belief in a secular context

[13] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), xxi.

is often shot through with doubt, contingency, relativism, and even a confrontation with the great abyss of meaninglessness and unknowing.

John McClure, in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Morrison and Pynchon,* believes that this ongoing fascination with religion and belief in contemporary American literature is part of a much longer postsecular American literary tradition characterized by "the turn back towards the religious."[14] Yet this turn is marked by a distinct distrust of the dogmatism of Christianity still beholden to Enlightenment epistemologies. Both McClure and Hungerford's work on contemporary American literature suggest that a more helpful take[15] on secularization is needed, one that does not try to show whether or not theological renderings of the world are on the way out, but rather how such renderings have changed in this new secular context.

In this dissertation, I explore what writers like Berry have to offer our secular moment, particularly in terms of how humans might better perceive and relate to the places they inhabit and for which they are responsible. I explore, in particular, how Berry and other contemporary American writers draw on and confront the Christian faith in particularly postsecular ways that unsettle the assumed narratives about just what reality is and what the human relationship to it might be.

Before diving in to such an exploration, however, I want to clarify something before we start. And to do so, I want to draw on a short book that helps preface my dissertation. In his 1940 treatise entitled *The Problem of Pain*, Oxford medievalist and popular Christian apologist, C.S.

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[14] John McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Morrison and Pynchon* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 3.

[15] I will explain the concept of "take" more fully below, but the importance that secularization is a matter of one's "take" comes from Charles Taylor, who, in *A Secular Age*, contrasts "open takes" with "closed spins." For Taylor, understanding secularization as an ineluctable diminishment of religious belief, for instance, is to render it through a particularly closed "spin" that the Academy cherishes. To understand this as a "take," however, renders it open and contestable to other narratives. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 551.

Lewis, addressed a question commonly understood to cast doubt on the Christian faith: how does the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent Creator-God account for the reality of pain and suffering in the world? If there is such a being, he either does not desire to relieve creation of its apparent torment and is therefore malicious, or he desires the world to be at peace, health, and wholeness but is unable to actualize this and is, therefore, impotent. In short, the argument asserts that God cannot be both good and powerful while the world continues as it is, "red in tooth and claw."[16]

What is of importance in *The Problem of Pain*, for my purposes at least, is the short introductory preface to the book. Lewis understands that the "problem"—so called—of pain only becomes a problem if a few basic assumptions are in place. First, Lewis notes, one must have some belief, understanding, or experience of "the Numinous," an inkling that "the universe is haunted by spirits."[17] Second, one needs a sense of morality, a sense of the right one "ought" to perform and the wrong one ought not to perform. Linking these first two points, Lewis argues that readers will also need to think that "the Numinous power to which they feel awe is made the guardian of the morality to which they feel an obligation."[18] Once this relational and communicative connection occurs between "the Numinous" and human behaviour, the reality of suffering in the world starts to become less of a troubling fact and more of a troubling

[16] This phrase first occurs in Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam" (1850) where he writes, "Nature, red in tooth and claw," to refer to the wild ferocity of nature that contradicts more pastoral depictions. See Alfred Gatty, *A Key to Lord Tennyson's "in Memoriam,"* Fourth ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905).

[17] C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1940), 5 – 6.

[18] Ibid, 12. It is also worth noting here that Lewis admits this third step is the most "unnatural" and throughout history few groups of people have ever committed to it entirely, but it breaks in upon Stoicism, paganism, and even pantheism in various ways. Lewis believes there was only a "single people, as a people, who took the new step with perfect decision," which was the Jews (and later Christians) who "fully and unambiguously identified the awful Presence haunting black mountain-tops and thunderclouds with 'the righteous Lord' who 'loveth righteousness' (Psalm 11:8)." Ibid, 13.

conundrum. Just why does a Numinous realm concerned with what "ought" to be *allow* the present reality to persist?

I have no desire to explore Lewis' theodicy here, but Lewis's introductory note is instructive. He is not attempting to exclude readers, but only to make them aware that what follows will make sense (or not) depending on how they relate to the various preconditions he lays out. Lewis, writing in the mid-twentieth century, is keenly aware that in the context in which he writes there are many who will come at this problem from very different starting points and very different experiential backgrounds. Some will completely discount the possibility of the Numinous, while others might discount that the Numinous, if there is such a thing, has any connection to human morality or the way things ought to be. Whatever the case, if one is interested in understanding suffering *as a problem*, it will help to become aware of the foundational understandings and belief systems that even allow it to become a problem in the first place.

In a similar way, the situation and argument of this project become more accessible if one is aware of their—and my—pre-existing assumptions. In what follows, I argue (alongside many others) that a key feature of the secular age briefly outlined above is the pervasive "myth" of disenchantment. Crudely stated, this is an imaginative rendering of the material world, catalyzed in the Enlightenment but by no means unique to it, that the material world is mechanical and inert and its value is derivative of human use, control, and manipulation. [19] I will explore this "myth" (and my particular choice of phrasing) more fully in the opening chapter; however, at

[19] It should be noted that many in the hard sciences simply do not see the world in such a fashion. However, I agree with Jason Josephson-Storm's assessment that the "mechanized world picture" wrought through disenchantment has become "an ahistorical and universal "Real" against which other myths [narratives of the world] are shattered." See Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

this point it is worth noting that by "myth" I do not mean a false story, but rather, more broadly, a story that orients us in the world by making sense of, among other things, who we are, where we are going, what the earth is, and what our relationship to it should be. The "myth" of disenchantment, I argue, is a lived narrative that has generated many technological marvels yet has fostered a destructive stance toward the world, to others, and ultimately to ourselves. And this narrative has shaped both post-Enlightenment science *and* religion. A healthier relationship between humans and nature requires many things, of course, but fundamentally it must involve some form of re-enchantment, an alternative or revised myth by which we might live.

I maintain that the theological visions in contemporary American literature provide some of the possible re-narrations—or myths of re-enchantment—in the secular age that are worthy of serious attention. In particular, there are three contemporary American writers who draw specifically on the challenges and possibilities *within* Christian religion as it exists within a postsecular secular culture in order to reimagine the relationship between humans and nature. These writers are Christian Wiman, Marilynne Robinson, and Wendell Berry. Each of these authors write against particular aspects of our disenchanted, secular condition that they find inadequate for understanding and relating to the natural world. They counter the lived mythology of disenchantment, and often quite explicitly. They confessionally identify within the tradition of Christianity, yet they also write against contemporary versions, often heavily dogmatic or fundamentalist, that they find inadequate for addressing this world. Because of this, each of these writers has also not found themselves to be "at home" in certain Christian communities. I am drawn to these writers because their calls to re-enchant the earth are not simply nostalgic longings to recover a "more Christian" world that has departed. Rather, their calls for *re-*

enchantment involve articulating and imagining the ways in which Christianity can be inflected and informed *by* the disenchanted, secular age.

I understand that the particular argument and focus of this project might sound tendentious for those who disagree with some or all of the claims of Christianity. Yet my intrigue remains in how Christianity—as mediated in contemporary American literature through the writings of Wiman, Robinson, and Berry—poses significant challenges both for Christians whose practices are undergirded by the perduring myth of disenchantment and for anyone else who remain unsettled and unsatisfied by this myth and haunted by a natural world that does not seem to fit within its constraints.

CHAPTER ONE: THE MYTH OF DISENCHANTMENT

Living by Myths in the (Post)secular Age

"A human community," Wendell Berry writes in "The Work of Local Culture," "must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself—in lore and story and song—that will be its culture."[20] Berry's reflection comes as he looks upon a seemingly simple compost bucket which is silently undertaking "the greatest miracle [of] making earth" from the nuts, leaves, rain water, and branches that have, over the years, accumulated within it.[21] From the death of such earthy things emerges life-giving soil. This is the mundane miracle upon which all human life and, by extension, all human culture, depends. While it might seem so at first glance, this bucket "is not trivial," but remains, Berry writes, "one of the signs by which [he] knows [his] country and [him]self."[22]

What Berry calls the "miracle of life"[23] witnessed in the cultivation of soil is but one example of the complex ecological reality in which humans find themselves from birth to death. We need food to eat, water to slake our thirst, air to breathe, soil in which to cultivate food, sunlight and rain and fire. We are made of matter and depend on it for our ongoing life. For Berry, the relationship between humans and humus—between humans and the material world—is a key marker of whether a culture is healthy or diseased.

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[20] Wendell Berry, "The Work of Local Culture," *What are People For?* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1990), 154.

[21] Ibid, 153.

[22] Ibid, 154.

[23] Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2000), 6.

Humans are, unlike other animals, also *storied* creatures. And the shared memories and narratives of our past form and inform the cultures we make and pass on. How we story, or mythologize, our situation and experience impact how we orient ourselves in the world and how we behave. For Berry, preserving the world requires, at least, two forms of local work: the active cultivation of good topsoil and the active remembering and passing down of shared stories and traditions. What becomes manifest in our culture and in our soil is an accounting of what was put in. What concerns Berry and the other writers who are the focus of this project is that the ecological destruction that permeates American culture is a manifestation and symptom of a diseased culture. Healing requires better inputs. It requires better practices of land use, to be sure, but it also requires cultural memory and more life-giving narratives that might better orient humans to each other and to their world.

In the latter half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, it has become clear that the global culture and economy Berry feared in works such as *A Continuous Harmony* and *The Unsettling of America* would erode and destroy local American culture and local bioregions has attained a potency unique to human history. Indeed in "The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Agriculture," one of the early essays from *The Unsettling of America*, Berry's warnings about wilderness depletion, the death of small towns and communities, the fracturing of families, and the growing inability of most Americans to produce and prepare food let alone to know where it comes from are all symptoms of a disease that today has come to full fruition.[24]

The destruction of the natural world is so unique that a growing consensus is emerging around a new term for our epoch: the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene—like soil made in a compost bucket—did not come from nothing. Rather, we got precisely what we put in. And in

[24] Wendell Berry, "The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Agriculture," *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 17 – 27.

this dissertation, I want to argue that the current moment of the Anthropocene which so unsettles American culture—that is, makes it a culture of dis-ease—is the consequence of post-Enlightenment religious and scientific narratives—lived mythologies—that encourage humans to take a destructive stance over and against the natural world.

In American literature today, the writings of Christian Wiman, Marilynne Robinson, and Wendell Berry are only several of many voices indicating there is ongoing and growing dissatisfaction with these post-Enlightenment lived mythologies that seek to separate humanity from nature, defining humans in a relation over-and-against it. There is a growing desire to envision and articulate new lived mythologies, new narratives, that might help us better reimagine this world and the human place in it.

In this opening chapter, I begin by exploring just how the Anthropocene functions as an extension of the Enlightenment project in two significant and interconnected ways. First, there is a cultivation of the technological and scientific stance towards the material world. Second, there is an anti-religious bias encoded into this stance. Without getting too far afield in the complexities of the Enlightenment project, I briefly explore these twin threads through one of the paradigmatic Enlightenment proponents: Francis Bacon. After unearthing a small section of these deeper Enlightenment roots to our Anthropocene malaise, I will suggest that there are even deeper roots to the entire Enlightenment project that are Christian.

There are primarily two related reasons that I explore the longer story of the Anthropocene in this chapter. First, if the Christian alternatives to disenchantment we find in contemporary American literature are to make sense, it will have to be with the understanding that Christianity is complicit in the very problems some of its practitioners attempt to address.

Therefore, second, this story helps us to move beyond simplistic and reductive conflict narratives of religion and science, faith and reason and towards the more productive middle spaces.

As noted in the Preface, the specific focal point of this project wherein religion and ecology and literature intersect in important ways is what I am calling the myth of disenchantment. This lived mythology, I argue, permeates the Anthropocene and is one of the deepest sites of unease that has catalyzed various attempts towards a new lived mythology of re-enchantment. I will therefore first address clearly what I mean in regard to "lived mythology" and then turn my attention to the particular features of disenchantment. These features are articulated early in the 20th century by the sociologist Max Weber whose popular account persists. However, I will look much more closely at the ways in which philosopher Charles Taylor frames disenchantment in the context of the secular age in which belief and unbelief exist in a creative —and arguably sometimes quite hostile—tension with one another. Taylor's situating of disenchantment is, I argue, a helpful and necessary entryway for exploring the distinctly postsecular forms of Christianity—and re-enchantment—on offer in the writing of Wiman, Robinson, and Berry.

The Anthropocene: Our Post-Enlightenment Malaise

To better understand the context in which Wiman, Robinson, and Berry are articulating their particularly Christian narratives about material reality, it will help to understand the malaise that pervades contemporary thought in the Anthropocene era. While the Anthropocene is a relatively new development, the term itself has longer historical roots. In 1870, the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani proposed that a new geological era had dawned: the "age of man." His

proposed "Anthropozoic" never caught on,[25] yet over a century later, when the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen declared that the Holocene—the post-glacial age which dates back about 12,000 years ago—was over and the Anthropocene had begun, the notion stuck.[26] In textbooks and academic conferences, niche academic journals and popular magazines, a growing consensus emerged that we are indeed living in a new epoch, one in which human activity is so pervasive and so potent that it has drastically altered the course of the entire human and non-human world.[27]

As Crutzen explains it, the Anthropocene is marked by "human dominance of biological, chemical, and geological processes on Earth." [28] From genetic modification of food to the poisoning of the rain to the increase of greenhouse gases and the destruction of the ozone layer, the fingerprints of humans, for better and for worse, are on everything. In an article written ten years after he popularized the term, Crutzen clarifies just how significant this new epoch is in terms of its unprecedented reformulation of the human relationship to the natural world:

> In the 20th century, new technologies, fossil fuels, and a fast-growing population resulted in a "Great Acceleration" of our own powers. Albeit clumsily, we are taking control of Nature's realm, from climate to DNA. We humans are becoming the dominant force for

[25] Elizabeth Kolbert, "Enter the Anthropocene—The Age of Man," *National Geographic* (March 2011), Accessed July 2020, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2011/03/age-of-man/

[26] Paul Crutzen, "The Anthropocene," *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, ed Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Kraft (Springer Berlin: Heidelberg, 2002), 14.

[27] It should be noted that the term *Anthropocene* is also under continuous debate since it "provides a new lens through which age-old narratives and philosophical questions are being revisited and rewritten" and has "the potential to radically revise the way we think of what it means to be human" (4). For more on this, see Erle C Ellis, *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[28] Paul Crutzen and Christian Schwagerl, "Living in the Anthropocene: A New Global Ethos," *Yale Environment 360 (*2011), Accessed Summer 2020: https://e360.yale.edu/features/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos

change on Earth. A long-held religious and philosophical idea — humans as the masters of planet Earth — has turned into a stark reality.[29]

The techno-industrial advances of the Anthropocene have inarguably bestowed benefits on the human world. Increased life-expectancy, agriculture productivity, and disease control are but a few of the most obvious and profound accomplishments made possible by relatively recent human technologies. But Crutzen's prose is hardly characterized by unfettered optimism. And perhaps what is most telling is that the current stark reality of the Anthropocene is, according to Crutzen, the endgame of both a scientific *and* religious narrative in which humans render themselves "masters of planet Earth."[30] Crutzen does not explicitly state it here, but he has both the post-Enlightenment narrative of scientific mastery *and* the Christian "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1: 26-28[31] in his crosshairs. These twin narratives, according to Crutzen, have created the conditions in which the Anthropocene even became possible. And Crutzen, like many today, is not optimistic about what this has meant.

In ecocritical literature, a very well-known and often referenced lecture[32] by Lynn White Jr. asserts the same point as Crutzen's, albeit more explicitly, about the religious beliefs that catalyzed the ecological problems inherent in the Anthropocene. In "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" White argues that "what people do about their ecology depends on what they

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[29] Ibid

[30] Ibid

[31] Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, / in the image of God he created him; / male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Genesis 1: 26 – 28, *English Standard Version (ESV)*.

[32] As a sign of how influential White's essay has been in ecocritical discourse, I should note that it was included as the first essay in Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1996), a collection which identified ecocriticism as a new critical methodology that was truly interdisciplinary. In addition, White's essay was included in Ken Hiltner's *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (Routledge, 2015) and received extended treatment in Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and the Literary Imagination* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

think about themselves in relation to things around them."[33] To frame this as Berry might, a healthy culture is manifested by how the land is treated *and* the narratives from which such ecological thinking and behaviours emerge. The problem for White, like Crutzen, is that the religious narrative of the West is predominantly a dualistic form of Christianity that has encouraged humans to see themselves as set apart from nature. Humans, in this Christian figuration, exist in a relationship defined by mastery and control over a nature whose goodness and value requires the cultivating work of human hands and the meaning making work of human minds. And this relationship is not only endorsed, but mandated, by God.

White writes: "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, […] not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[34] For White, "more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."[35] While there are numerous contemporary American writers thinking about ecology from the perspective of "new" religious formulations or non-Christian religions; my interest is how (and why) writers like Berry, Robinson, and Wiman undertake the task of rethinking Christianity.

The Anthropocene has inarguably given rise to many of the technological advances that most of us enjoy today, yet it is marked by *dis*-ease. The past century has witnessed a rise in nuclear technologies that can power the world *and* wipe out civilization as we know it. It has provided us with the nitrogen fixation that allows for an abundance of food for a growing population *but also* hypoxic zones and infertile topsoil that make life untenable. It has catalyzed

[33] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 37 (1967): 1204.
[34] Ibid
[35] Ibid

the creation of new roads and forms of connectivity *and* the rising pollutants that make air unsafe to breathe and water unsafe to drink. Species are going extinct and ecosystems are collapsing at unprecedented rates. This ongoing and intensifying destruction of the natural world is one of the most potent sources of malaise in our late-modern world. And while we might revel in the benefits that the Anthropocene has bestowed on humans, many are rightfully alarmed that such advances are anything but, if they are created through the unsustainable destruction of the natural world on which all life—humanity included—depends.

The rise of increasingly potent and pervasive technologies has long been understood to be a particular consequence and inheritance of post-Enlightenment applications of the scientific method to the betterment of humanity and it is often, somewhat problematically, conflated with the Christian belief, rooted in Genesis 1: 26-28, that the earth is to be subdued and dominated by humans. Both Crutzen and Lynn White Jr. make this conflation. Yet separating the historical Christian tradition from its post-Enlightenment rendering is not to excuse it, but to create a much more productive way of understanding how contemporary American writers are attempting to recover certain Christian insights regarding ecology in a secular age.

This recovery project is not merely difficult to do, but also difficult to understand and take seriously, in a post-Enlightenment world conditioned to see a conflict and tension between science and religion, reason and faith. Without going into too much detail, the seeds of this conflict are already evident early in the rise of the Modern age in the writings of Francis Bacon. While Francis Bacon wrote numerous tracts and essays, perhaps no other text quite captures the feeling of the Enlightenment's unfettered optimism than his unpublished and incomplete 1626 novella *New Atlantis*.[36] In the work Bacon envisions a utopian society, Bensalem, that is built on

[36] Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis and The Great Instauration*, ed Jerry Weinberger (Wheeling, IL: Crofts Classics, 1989).

both Christian and humanistic principles and dedicated to uncovering—or, rather, extracting—the secrets of nature through repeated experimentation and observation. Historian Morris Berman argues that "Bacon pointed out that one had to question nature directly by putting it in a position in which it was forced to yield up its answers."[37] Through Bacon's writing we not only get a sense of a new scientific optimism, but we start to sense a new posture towards nature emerging. This posture characterizes the post-Enlightenment, Modern world.[38] Thinking retrospectively about this posture in the world, Romano Guardini argues that through Bacon and other Enlightenment theorists of the "new" science arises the possibility for the "technological man [who] experiences nature neither as a strand of value nor as a living shelter for his spirit [but] as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape."[39] Guardini's point is worth reiterating: the technological man of the post-Enlightenment world only becomes really possible when the very nature of material reality and humanity's relationship to it is reconfigured through a new, lived mythology that shapes one's very stance toward the world.

The Enlightenment's new rendering of the earth also emerged alongside a new skeptical attitude towards the inherited knowledge of religious tradition, particularly Christianity in the West. Bacon is also one of the chief Enlightenment articulators for distrusting religious beliefs in the pursuit of this-worldly knowledge. In his magisterial *Novum Organum*, which articulates the "new" scientific method, Francis Bacon also theorized that attaining this new posture to the world required removing various "idols of the mind" that, in earlier ages, were hurdles to a true,

[37] Morris Berman, *The Re-enchantment of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 28.

[38] To be clear, the "counter-Enlightenment" impulses of ecocriticism are well documented. For a full overview of this literature, see L. Hinchman and S. Hinchman, "Should Environmentalists Reject the Enlightenment?" *The Review of Politics* vol 63, no. 4 (2001), 663 – 692.

[39] Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, Trans. Joseph Theman and Herbert Brooke (Delaware: ISI Books, 1956), 55.

more *useful* knowledge of reality. Among these Bacon included "idols of the theater," which were the performed idols and narrative practices attached to religious dogma and ancient tradition. In Bacon's assessment, unverified beliefs, myths, and superstitions were uncritical and naïve ways of apprehending the world that more careful and progressive quality of attention could undo. Bacon writes:

> Lastly, there are Idols which have immigrated into men's minds from the various dogmas of philosophies, and also from wrong laws of demonstration. These I call Idols of the Theater, because in my judgment all the received systems are but so many stage plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion. Nor is it only of the systems now in vogue, or only of the ancient sects and philosophies, that I speak; for many more plays of the same kind may yet be composed and in like artificial manner set forth; seeing that errors the most widely different have nevertheless causes for the most part alike. Neither again do I mean this only of entire systems, but also of many principles and axioms in science, which by tradition, credulity, and negligence have come to be received.[40]

Attention to Bacon's thought helps to explain a particular anti-religious sentiment that runs through the Enlightenment. As intellectual and cultural descendants of the Enlightenment, we recognize how similar anti-religious sentiments still exist today. Among the idols of the theater, Bacon includes "superstitions" which are an "unwholesome mixture of things human and divine" which causes both "fantastic philosophy" and also "heretical religion."[41] Bacon believed Christianity (Catholicism in particular) was a particular form of this unhelpful superstition that

[40] Francis Bacon. *The New Organon,* Book 1. Trans James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath. *The Works of Francis Bacon.* Vol 8 (Boston: Taggard and Thompson, 1863).

[41] Ibid

impeded scientific thought.[42] Within Bacon's argument one sees that the rise of the "technological man" that Guardini describes as the embodiment of the Anthropocene has emerged at least partly within a conflicted space between reason and faith, science and religion that was cultivated by the Enlightenment. And it is this conflicted space that becomes a hallmark of the rising post-Enlightenment secularism that is the dominant context in which contemporary American fiction must be read.

But this is only part of the post-Enlightenment narrative, one that focuses solely upon the rise of a modern science reimagining what material reality is while also attempting to detach itself from religious belief. However, to get a more complete narrative, it is important to also remember that modern science became possible because of shifts *within* Christian theology and, in turn, Christian theology became inflected by this new narrative of the world. There are multiple accounts of this, some of them referenced below, but for this particular aspect of the narrative I rely on the work of Charles Taylor. He notes in *A Secular Age* that well before Bacon, the ground was being prepared for the *Novum Organon* by theological discussions of the high middle ages about the nature of nature. It was not scientists but theologians such as William of Occam and Duns Scotus who were worried that an Aristotelian-inspired Thomism actually put limits upon God.[43]

As a counter to Thomism, Scotus and Occam proposed nominalism, a theological movement which attempted to create distance between a God who was not bound by the world of time and change and His creation which was; they argued that "the super-agent who is God relates to things as freely to be disposed of according to his autonomous purposes."[44] Therefore

[42] See Howard B. White, *Peace Among the Willows: The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon* (Springer Netherlands, 1968), 73 – 74.
[43] *A Secular Age*, 97.
[44] Ibid

nominalists sought to exclude final causation, or teleology, as a category of knowledge for the natural world. This was not to deny God's existence nor even his free involvement in the world. Rather, it was only to suggest that the material, formal, and efficient causes of Nature were alone worthy of intellectual, *scientific* pursuit. Such a move created an intellectual climate wherein the mechanized world of modern science is far from inevitable, but much more plausible. This is the first step towards a form of Christian Deism in which distinct spheres of secular and sacred, natural and supernatural are emerging. In such a framework, the church and Christianity's role truly become *other*worldly. And once God is removed from the ongoing processes of nature, the myth of a disenchanted world becomes much more plausible. The myth of disenchantment, then, is partially a consequence *of* Christian theology.

Disconnecting God from the earth and, by extension, science from religion and belief, is not, according to James K.A. Smith, some sort of "virgin birth" of modernity; "Even modernity," Smith notes, "has an unrecognized father: the late middle ages."[45] Indeed both modernity and postmodernity are marked by an inability—or unwillingness, Smith admits—to look at these fathers and better understand them since it is Scotus who leads the way to "a radical separation of Creator from creature, entailing a discrete, *secular* order."[46] The theological shift wrought by nominalism is significant for the story I want to tell because in reconfiguring nature as an autonomous realm, rather than as a God-controlled and God-sustained realm, a new stance to the world is also being introduced *via* Christian theology that paves the way for the forthcoming Enlightenment disposition. A new self is emerging: "We, the dependent, created agents have to

[45] James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 94. Indeed, Smith's work here is to introduce the Radical Orthodoxy movement within Christian theology of the early 21st century that, among other things, is intrigued in tracing back the historical narrative of theology and philosophy to better understand its own complicity in the secular age and, consequently, disenchantment.

[46] Ibid, 99.

relate to these things [nature] not in terms of the normative patterns they reveal, but in terms of the autonomous super-purposes of our Creator. The purposes things serve are extrinsic to them. The stance is fundamentally one of instrumental reason."[47] Contrary to some narratives of the Enlightenment, this stance did not emerge simply in resistance to Christian thought, but through a subtle shift within Christian thought. Indeed, it is shortly after these theological shifts, John Milbank argues, that Christian conceptions of the cultural mandate in Genesis are largely co-opted: "Adam's dominion over creation is now defined in terms of power, and more specifically, a power over things in terms of property."[48] In the final chapter of this project, Wendell Berry's re-engagement with the cultural mandate within the strictures of a disenchanted world is nothing less than a hacking at these theological and cultural roots which are centuries deep.

While the posture of control over the world is often understood as a consequence of modern science, it is important to understand when we turn to religious alternatives that this stance was originally made possible by shifts within Christianity. And this stance is possible because both post-Enlightenment science and Christianity have often inhabited a shared lived mythology.

The "Myth" of Disenchantment

The American naturalist E.O. Wilson[49] notes, when it comes to "Enlightenment founders, [Bacon's] spirit is the one that most endures. It informs us across four centuries that we must understand nature both around us and within ourselves in order to set humanity on the course of

[47] Ibid

[48] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 12 – 13.

[49] I make particular mention of E.O. Wilson here because he becomes a key sparring partner with both Wendell Berry and, to a lesser extent, Marilynne Robinson.

self-improvement."[50] E.O. Wilson and Francis Bacon span four centuries, but they are both representative of variations of a particular story about the modern world. This story, or myth, has profoundly shaped the ways in which nature is perceived, imagined, interacted with, used, and subsequently abused. It has even informed theological interpretations of Genesis, as noted above, that continue to animate various Christian communities in America today. This myth, this narrative, is a true accomplishment of Western thought and has allowed for all the technological ingenuity that characterize the Anthropocene, to be sure. However, I argue that this myth has also been the source of our increasing unrest and dis-ease as environmental degradation threatens to undo us. The post-Enlightenment myth that has so shaped perceptions of nature is the myth of disenchantment.

Before unpacking what is entailed by this myth, I want to make clear that to argue disenchantment is a *myth* is not to suggest that it is untrue or has never happened. Rather, what I mean is that as myth, disenchantment provides a potent, orienting narrative for those who are intellectual descendants of the Enlightenment, now living in the modern world. When it comes to talking about myth on narrative terms, I am taking my cues, in part, from Jason Josephson-Storm and his recent scholarship in *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of Human Sciences*. Josephson-Storm acknowledges that the notion of "myth" does not have the proper connotations for a contemporary audience, yet he suggests our reticence about the term is indicative of how beholden to a certain story of the world we remain. Our reticence has deep roots.

He maintains that suspicion towards the truth of "myths" is due in large part to how the German Romantics framed the Enlightenment as "an anti-myth, a myth that described itself in

[50] E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Thought* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 24.

terms of longing, absence, and *mythlessness*."[51] As the Romantics understood it, and as just noted in the passage from Bacon, the Enlightenment had self-consciously sought out to abolish mythic tradition, casting doubts on the validity and necessity of these false, shared narratives—these *mythologies*—which indeed gave cultures their coherence and rooted them to particular places, but were not helpful in properly understanding the nature of reality. The Enlightenment project, as articulate by Bacon and others, sought to liberate individuals from these superstitious stories in order to more fully comprehend the world in ways that tradition, religion, and superstition inhibited.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno also argue that the Enlightenment project was ultimately about "the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy."[52] Yet even though the Enlightenment aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty through such a dissolution of mythology, it failed to deliver on its promises. Rather, and this is Horkheimer and Adorno's central argument, it became the source of a *new* regnant mythology:

> In the enlightened world, mythology has entered into the profane. In its blank purity, the reality which has been cleansed of demons and their conceptual descendants assumes the numinous character which the ancient world attributed to demons. Under the title of brute facts, the social injustice from which they proceed is now as assuredly sacred a preserve as the medicine man was sacrosanct by reason of the projection of his gods.[53]

[51] Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 61.

[52] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 3.

[53] Ibid, *2*8.

In the act of stripping away myth, superstitions, and religious belief, the Enlightenment merely gave rise to a powerful, new *mythos*, one that demanded belief in the omnicompetence of utilitarian reason, empirical observation, the "new" science, and new technological applications rather than in traditions and beliefs, a pantheon of gods, or the unobservable spirits of some numinous realm.

Horkheimer and Adorno note that an enduring characteristic of the Enlightenment *mythos* is the disenchantment of the world, which "is the extirpation of animism. […] [Such categories as spirits] were abandoned as *idola theatri* of the old metaphysics and assessed as being even then memorials of the elements and powers of the prehistory for which life and earth disclosed their nature in myths and became interwoven in them."[54] As noted earlier, this myth of disenchantment catalyzed a particular stance to the world wherein many "want to learn from nature how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men."[55] Far from being sanguine about the illumination human reason has shed upon the earth, Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that "the fully enlightened earth radiates *disaster triumphant*."[56] In other words: the triumphant disaster of ecological degradation is now a potent source of our malaise in the post-Enlightenment Anthropocene. This enlightened disenchantment of the world has led to the world's desecration.

To say disenchantment is a myth is to appreciate its potency as a narrative capable of shaping the contours of thought and experience. However, it also suggests that disenchantment can remain open to counter-myths or counter-narratives. When the disenchanted world is

[54] Ibid, 5.
[55] Ibid, 4.
[56] Ibid, 3.

assumed to simply be verified as "the way things are" and no longer a shared narrative is when it becomes most potent and most debilitating: its contestability is forgotten.

That such myths are *lived* narratives is the central premise of Mary Midgley's *The Myths We Live By* in which she maintains that "myths are not lies [but] imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning."[57] For Midgley, "our imaginative visions are central to our understanding of the world."[58] Such a claim, she acknowledges, runs counter to an age proceeding from the Enlightenment that has "saved us this trouble [of being guided by our imagination] by completely eliminating myths and fairy-tales from our thinking."[59] But for Midgley—much like for Horkheimer and Adorno—the Enlightenment did not put an end to mythology, but merely replaced certain mythologies for other ones: "What the Enlightenment did was to develop its own set of myths, striking pictures whose attraction usually relies on the lure of reduction."[60] Several features of this reduction, particular in reference to the myth of disenchantment, will start to emerge in this chapter.

To reiterate, that disenchantment is a "myth" is not to say that disenchantment never happened. My argument in this project is precisely the opposite: it is because disenchantment functions *as* a "myth we live by" that it has become such a powerful way of orienting behavior, directing perception, and informing experience. And it involves a lot more (although, no less) than simply imagining the numinous, spiritual realm away.

The myth of disenchantment creates a particular hermeneutic, or interpretative lens, through which the world and humanity's relationship to it are perceived and enacted. It shapes

[57] Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.
[58] Ibid, xii.
[59] Ibid, xiii.
[60] Ibid

our views on the *locus* of meaning in the world, it shapes our views on ourselves, and it shapes our views on our relationship to the entire world that is not human. Overall, this myth relies on the assertion that nature, the world beyond our heads, is inert and this mechanistic, law-bound, non-human environment can be—and should be—fully grasped by the human mind and hand. This myth of a disenchanted world has catalyzed a stance of human control and dominance over-and-against non-human nature that has given us undeniable power for creation and destruction. Both science and Christian theology have been complicit in its perpetuation. And it is this particular aspect of the "enlightened earth" that causes our dis-ease and for the past centuries "radiates disaster triumphant."[61] But because it *is* a myth, there remains hope: counter-myths are always on offer.

That the myth of disenchantment has led to a problematic stance over-and-against the world is to suggest that our ecological problems today are not simply solved by better technology and science, as Lynn White Jr. noted. While these will obviously be necessary, they are downstream of the deeper problems about our perception of the world, the presuppositions undergirding it, and the technologies and practices that perpetuate and encode it. "The source of the environmental crisis," Neil Evernden noted in the early 1990s, "lies not without but within, not in industrial effluent but in assumptions so casually held as to be virtually invisible."[62] He is likely overstating the case. We need both. However, the "invisible assumptions" about the world inherent to the myth of disenchantment are difficult for those who inhabit the modern world to see clearly. In many ways, myths act like lenses. We may think that we simply look *through* them, but they colour all we see. Until we are forced to look *at* them. And we are only forced to

[61] Adorno and Horkheimer, 3.

[62] Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*. 2nd Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), xii.

look at them when we get the uncanny feeling that they are no longer adequately revealing the world to us as they should. The growing concern about our unravelling natural world has been bringing many, for quite a while now, to such a moment.[63] We are the least likely to understand the myth of disenchantment that has become so pervasive in the day to day experience of modern life.

It is precisely the modern experience of life that led the 20th century sociologist Max Weber to articulate the distinct features of our disenchanted age. Just over a century ago, Weber examined modernity's disenchantment in his 1918 lecture "Science as Vocation."
In the context of the entire essay, Weber's claim was that the increased intellectualization and rationalization of the post-Enlightenment West gave a certain hegemony (at least in the Academy) to the notion that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."[64] According to Weber, such a posture towards the world becomes possible through a disenchantment of material reality that alters experience. People might still believe in spirits inhabiting matter or be intrigued by the possibility—that is, there are still religious believers, for instance—but they do not *experience* the spiritual world in the same ways most did several centuries prior. The fear or reverence or awe that marked a material world infused by an unseen, spiritual realm is lost in a world illuminated by utilitarian reason and subjected to human control for human purposes.

This new posture is confident in its belief that one no longer has to have recourse to *magical* means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the modern occult participants or

[63] It cannot be stressed enough, however, that such reimagining (or re-mythologizing) has been underway for centuries. The Romantics, the Transcendentalists, and most recently the new materialists have all sought better ways to figure the world and challenge the myth of disenchantment.

[64] Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," From *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: 1981), 140.

even religious adherents for whom such powers continue to exist and operate. In the disenchanted world, Weber argues, "Technical means and calculations perform the service."[65] Alongside this impulse to control nature was an ineluctable diminishment of awe and wonder as an intelligent response to the world. Or as naturalist Robert MacFarlane quips: "Mastery usurped mystery."[66]

But this is not to say that scientists were not constantly pushing up against the edges of all they did not know and confronting the "mysterious" realm of the unknown behind the appearances. What changed, in Weber's account, was a new confidence in humanity's power to know, and the implicit assumption that simply with more time and better *techne* the unknown aspects of the world would, eventually and inevitably, be understood. Anybody today who has survived diabetes because of insulin knows this attitude has had undoubted human benefit. Yet Weber notes that the contingency and the limits of human knowledge which may very well have led to a posture of humility and restraint, were increasingly lost in the new scientific attitude sweeping through European research universities after the Enlightenment.

American Literature in the (Post)Secular Age

This familiar story of disenchantment been told by many and in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett maintains that "Weber's version [of disenchantment] is the most influential."[67] Bennett's claim, however, is now a bit dated given that the philosopher Charles Taylor's sprawling account of disenchantment in *A Secular Age* has done more to revive and reshape the conversation around disenchantment today, influencing a wide swath of academic

[65] Ibid, 140.
[66] Robert MacFarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), 25.
[67] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2001), 57.

disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, intellectual history, and, most significantly for this project, literary theory.[68] In some ways, Taylor's account of the myth of disenchantment[69] follows roughly the same contours as Weber's, which I will not rehash. Yet what is of particular importance for Taylor is how disenchantment functions as a central feature of our secular age.[70] In Taylor's particular narrative about secularization, I argue, we gain a valuable hermeneutic framework for reading contemporary American writers who offer important counter-myths of re-enchantment.

The American writers who are the primary focus of this project, I have noted, are Christian Wiman, Marilynne Robinson, and Wendell Berry, each of whom draw explicitly upon the Christian tradition in order to develop what I term "myths of re-enchantment." Christian Wiman, for starters, is an acclaimed American poet who served as the editor of the prestigious *Poetry* magazine from 2003 to 2013 and (at the time of writing this) is teaching at Yale Divinity School. He has received numerous awards, including The Commonwealth Prize for his 2010 collection *Every Riven Thing*, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a National Book Critics Circle Award for his poetry collection *Once in the West*. Wiman is far from a fringe voice in contemporary American thought and poetry. Apart from his poetry (and noted throughout his poetry) is the fact that Wiman suffers from an excruciatingly painful and rather rare form of cancer. In *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, Wiman wrestles with this difficult diagnosis and painful treatments that push him to the edge of his physical limits. In his

[68] Particularly the "postsecular" theorists, which will receive some attention in this chapter. See Tracey Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[69] Taylor does not explicitly use the language of "myth" in reference to disenchantment. However, as I will explore, Taylor's argument that disenchantment is only ever a "take" or a "construal" is generally the same thing Midgley has in mind regarding myths. See: *A Secular Age*, 549.

[70] This term, *secular,* is contested and will receive more treatment in a moment. Particularly as contemporary American literary studies have been fascinated, of late, in whether or not we are in a "post-secular" moment.

meandering and provocative collection of fragmented essays, Wiman ponders just what death, that final human limit, might reveal about the world:

> …to die well, even for the atheist, is to believe that there is some way of dying into life rather than simply away from it, some form of survival that love makes possible. I don't mean by survival merely persisting in the memory of others; I mean something deeper and more durable. If quantum entanglement is true, if related particles react in similar or opposite ways even when separated by tremendous distances, then it is obvious that the whole world is alive and communicating in ways we do not fully understand. And we are part of that life, part of that communication—even as, maybe even especially as, our atoms begin the long dispersal we call death.[71]

Wiman, at the time of writing this, has converted from Atheism to Christianity. In a sense, he has found a new myth by which to live. Yet what is intriguing in the previous passage is that his rendering of an afterlife does not invoke some other realm of disembodied spirit. Rather, he articulates a vision of this material world as a place that is alive and communicative in non-human ways. In Chapter Two, I will explore more fully Wiman's understanding of matter as the ongoing site of God's communicative presence. At this point, however, it is simply worth noting that death, for Wiman, is the absorption of life back into a communicative, living, re-enchanted material reality. And this new rendering is accompanied by a new posture to the world. Wiman repeatedly notes how this reality ultimately eludes one's intellectual and linguistic grasp. Human knowledge and human language are contingent and limited.

Wiman's (re)conversion to the Christian faith becomes a conversion to a new myth by which to live. Yet the Christianity he articulates in his spiritual memoir, *My Bright Abyss*, is a

[71] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2013), 35.

distinctly postsecular form of Christianity. In it, Wiman explores how his faith shapes his understanding of poetic language and its ability to open up possibilities of the world's re-enchantment. For Wiman, words become the way that humans respond to a world that is, first, the ongoing utterance of its Creator. All language, for Wiman, is such an attestation to the Christian myth of re-enchantment.

Facing death well is actually the driving force behind the American novelist Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead* (2004). *Gilead* is composed of letters (or journal entries) written by the dying Pastor John Ames for his young son Robby. Like Wiman, Robinson uses death—the seeming *end* of material life—to explore just what material reality might be. In a passage early in the novel, Ames shares a rather bizarre childhood memory, that of baptizing a litter of cats with water:

> I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time.[72]

Through Ames' recollections and reflections, Robinson consistently evokes a natural world whose sacredness is not constructed by humans, but only acknowledged and responded to (or not). Ames suggests that to offer a human blessing like baptism—simply the placement of water

[72] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2003), 23.

on the head of another creature—is not some hollowed out ritual upon which humans give meaning; rather, it is a charged act because the world in which it occurs is already infused with blessedness and meaning. Robinson repeatedly attempts to recover the theological notion from the Protestant Reformer John Calvin that the natural world can be experienced as the theater of God's ongoing presence. By doing this, Robinson's vision of re-enchantment is nothing less than a recovery of the notion of God's continuous sustaining presence in and among the material world, His creation. The locus of significance and blessedness is not the experiencing human—even if their experience is what opens up the possibility of re-enchantment—but the material world that is always *given* before it is received or constructed. There is a sacredness, Ames maintains, that permeates the material world because the world exists in such a relation to its source before and after it exists in relation to humans. Robinson's fiction, even more so than Wiman's poetry, is hardly marginal in American letters. Her work has received remarkable critical and popular recognition, including the PEN/Hemingway Award for *Housekeeping* and a Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead*.

Finally, the Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry has been one of the most vocal and influential voices concerning how we relate to the natural world in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries marked by techno-industrial advances and a capitalism built on the premise that the earth is a limitless standing reserve of resources to be transformed into commodities for our use and enjoyment. From his earliest collections of essays to his most recent *The Art of Loading Brush*, Berry has been an unequivocal advocate in articulating that any attempt to heal the world from our abuses must first counter the reductive narratives of post-Enlightenment science and technology that have shaped not only our behaviors and thought, but even the Christian religion in which he claims his uneasy membership. In *Life is a Miracle: An*

Essay against Modern Superstition, Berry offers his most concise argument against such forms of environmentalism that do not go below the surface to the invisible assumptions behind our language that, in turn, shapes our actions in the world:

> …we have a lot of genuinely concerned people calling upon us to "save" a world which their language simultaneously reduces to an assemblage of perfectly featureless and dispirited "ecosystems," organisms," "environments," "mechanisms," and the like. It is impossible to prefigure the salvation of the world in the same language by which the world has been dismembered and defaced.[73]

Berry's argument is that to fail to see life as something spirited, or "miraculous," and "beyond us"[74] will perpetuate ecological destruction. Repeatedly over the last several decades in his poetry, essays, and fiction, Berry's mantra that all of life is a miracle in which humans participate counters the myth of disenchantment and it does so not by rejecting religious tradition as a barrier to true knowledge, but by drawing deeply from its wells. Berry's vision of a whole, healthy, and holy world is indebted to soil science and microbiology as much as it is to literature, philosophy, and Christian theology.

There are likely countless other writers I might have chosen for this project. However, I chose these three because they are contemporaries and have each, in their own way, reached an exulted status in contemporary American culture by audiences who are Christian and otherwise. As confessing, self-described Christians, their stature in American letters in a secular age bears attention and, given the critical scholarship (particularly around Robinson and Berry), they have received such attention.

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[73] *Life is a Miracle,* 8.
[74] Ibid, 9.

Yet how their projects interact with each other in terms of rearticulating the human-nature relationship along confessional lines that unsettle both Christian communities and secular materialists has not been noted. Therefore, I have chosen and arranged these authors in this project in order to note a subtle progression in, first, how the myth of disenchantment is challenged along postsecular Christian lines. For this I will turn first to the poetry and prose of Christian Wiman. Next, I turn to Marilynne Robinson's writing which moves us subtly towards ecological concerns by suggesting that a Christian myth of re-enchantment inculcates a new, healthier, posture and attention to the natural world by recovering the importance of human experience of both the world and, potentially, of the Divine. Finally, when I conclude with Wendell Berry, the movement towards sustainable practices in the earth are much more explicit and pronounced; indeed, Berry returns us to a sharp look at the Anthropocene and how recovering a postsecular Christian notion of stewardship, freed of its post-Enlightenment assumptions of mastery and control, might be a way that a counter-narrative becomes a counter-culture (or counter-agriculture).

The progression in my argument is, to be clear, in no way to suggest that there is any easy movement that is taking place more broadly in American letters among Christian writers such as these or any other. As noted, there is a lot of overlap between these authors, and in terms of age and popularity, Berry is, if anything, a precursor to Wiman and not vice-versa. The only movement here, then, is in terms of my own argument which is ultimately to understand how the myths by which we live might be renegotiated, might encourage new postures, and, finally, might inculcate more healthy ways of dwelling and working on the earth.

Disenchantment and the Secular Age

Charles Taylor's understanding of secularism helps frame the myth of disenchantment not merely as an outworking of some steady decline of religious belief. As indicated above, the statistics do not bear this out. Rather, what Taylor reveals is that disenchantment as lived mythology of the secular age impinges upon both belief and unbelief. By framing disenchantment in such a way, Taylor's study of secularism provides a necessary context for understanding the projects of Wiman, Robinson, and Berry. Taylor's unique account of the secular illuminates why these three contemporary American writers who identify with Christianity are never satisfied with strictly materialist accounts of reality, but *also* remain quite uncomfortable within mainstream forms of American Christianity that have been co-opted by, and often Christianized, various aspects of the myth of disenchantment. What interests Taylor is how religion—Christianity in particular—has not gone away but, instead, shifted in its new secular context.

It will be helpful to note here, too, how Taylor's account of the secular differs from others. Perhaps the most common narrative around secularization is that it has involved a general decline in religious belief and practice. Amy Hungerford notes that the sociologist Peter Berger, in *The Sacred Canopy,* argued, for instance, that the decline of religious belief in America in the postwar years was a "triumph of secularity."[75] Berger would eventually change this thesis, but through such accounts of the secular, it is easy to associate enchantment with religious belief and disenchantment with unbelief. Any claim to desire (or detest) re-enchantment becomes entangled in the seemingly fraught "conflict" between religion and science, faith and reason.

[75] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 6.

Yet Taylor does not accept the notion that faith or religion ever really left and so there was never a "triumph" of the secular on these grounds.[76] What interests Taylor is the creation of a secular *condition* in which belief and unbelief simultaneously occur in ways that are drastically different from several centuries ago. Taylor's project is difficult to summarize succinctly without getting lost in the long and winding history he provides as a contour map[77] of our secular age; however, I simply want to draw attention to some of the main features of his project and unpack a few key terms from his rather idiosyncratic lexicon[78] in order to better situate the myth of disenchantment as a key feature of secularism and, thus, create the hermeneutical framing through which the remaining chapters, each focusing on one of the aforementioned authors, can be read productively.

Like Weber, Taylor also understands disenchantment to be a narrative that shapes our experience of the world. And this experience is marked by a certain uneasiness. Already in his 1991 CBC Massey Lectures *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor notes that the world's disenchantment "widened the scope of instrumental reason" and removed the "sacred structure" [that is, notions of God as creator and earth as creation] that had previously provided meaning and purpose for individual modes of action and social arrangements. In the disenchanted world, Taylor goes on, "creatures that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being [and] are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our projects."[79]

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[76] Part of the genius in Jason Josephson-Storm's aforementioned book is how he shows that occult practices, magic, and superstition also never really left. In fact, the fascination in these "magical" practices grew both within the Academy and without.

[77] This notion of Taylor as cartographer comes from James K.A. Smith *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 2 – 3. In what follows I rely heavily on Taylor, but also the summation of Taylor's thought in the writing of James K.A. Smith that is less interpretation than a helpful systemization and organization of Taylor's rather unwieldy and scattershot project.

[78] For a helpful overview of this lexicon, see *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 140 – 143.

[79] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity: The Massey Lectures Series* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1991), 5.

While it may seem so on the face of it, Taylor's version of disenchantment is actually not quite such a simple narrative of decline and loss. Taylor argues that "there is a widespread unease that instrumental reason has enlarged its scope and threatens to take over our lives," but he also maintains that disenchantment "has been *liberating.*"[80]

Taylor's understanding of disenchantment is complex and, indeed, the major project that would unfold in Taylor's thought over the next decade was to complicate such simplistic, reductive narratives about not only disenchantment, but the entire secular age in which this myth becomes realized. Taylor calls these reductive accounts "subtraction stories," by which he means "accounts that explain 'the secular' as merely the *subtraction* of religious belief, as if the secular is what's left over after we subtract superstition."[81] John Teehan points out that it is obvious "that 'secular' society is not a society without religion; it is a society in which religion is held to be a private issue, separate from the public sphere."[82] But even this would not satisfy Taylor's account because religious expressions and belief are still made publicly and manifested in public.

James K.A. Smith explains that Taylor's interpretation of secularism is mixed (i.e. both positive and negative) because he is attempting to capture the *lived* complexities of modern life when it comes to questions of belief in a disenchanted age. Taylor's perspective might disorient those, Smith suggests, who are already given to subtraction narratives that only see secularization as a loss or, conversely, only a gain. Smith maintains that it is both the New Atheists *and* Christian fundamentalists whose potted accounts of the modern secular age are inadequate guides. This insight is helpful in understanding the precarious, liminal position that Wiman, Robinson, and Berry occupy between such polarized groups.

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[80] *The Malaise of Modernity,* 5.
[81] *How (Not) to be Secular,* 143.
[82] John Teehan, "Ethics, Secular and Religious: An evolved-cognitive analysis," *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, Eds. Phil Zuckerman and John Shook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 655.

Taylor maps out the complex story wherein the West moved "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[83] By orienting his study in such a way, Taylor is making a pivot from other historical uses of the *secular.* The first use being the classical and medieval accounts in which *secular* simply meant "of the world," and was distinguished from the sacred or transcendent.[84] Taylor calls this Secular_1.[85] The second account of the secular is one in which we are more familiarized. Secularism_2 is a particular product of modernity which, in the wake of the Enlightenment, "associated [the secular] with a nonsectarian, neutral, and areligious space or standpoint."[86] Secularism_2 is perhaps the most common understanding of secularism today, manifested in schools and public squares that are deemed secular because they are not affiliated with any religion. This second understanding of the secular belies much secularization theory today that maintains modernization and technological advancement lead to a decline in religious belief and, for our purposes, an acceptance of the myth of disenchantment. In many ways, when we turn to postsecular theory, it is, in Taylor's language, really *post*-secular_2.

Yet Taylor's unique construal of the secular is borne from his hunch that this second version of secularism fails to properly account for the ongoingness of belief. More troublesome, this form of secularism also becomes its own self-perpetuating metanarrative.[87] For this reason, Taylor tries to articulate a new understanding, which he terms Secularism_3. Taylor argues that the secular age is really one in which belief and faith, magic and superstition continue to exist

[83] *A Secular Age*, 3.
[84] *A Secular Age,* 1- 2.
[85] Ibid
[86] *How (Not) to be Secular,* 21.
[87] In the framing above, it's precisely the hangover of the Enlightenment and its self-understanding to be a "mythless" movement. Taylor will address this more *A Secular Age* by what he calls "takes," which I will turn to more fulsomely.

and find willing practitioners, yet they are now contestable and contested[88] in ways that differ from the pre-modern world in which such disbelief was more difficult.

Unbelief becomes much easier in the Secular$_3$—or the secular age—because new plausibility structures have been introduced. A plausibility structure, for Taylor, is simply the horizon of possibility that is generated with either a new technology or ideology. Unbelief today becomes increasingly plausible in the secular age (and unlike in earlier centuries) because of the introduction of what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism," a "humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing."[89] To live enclosed within a world that makes no recourse to any potential life or reality "beyond" what we experience in the material is, Taylor argues, to live within the "immanent frame," which is a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than a supernatural) order."[90] Again, it is well beyond the parameters of this paper to re-narrate Taylor's sprawling historical account that delves into the historical contingencies and lived complexities that lead to the immanent frame, yet a few aspects are worth considering since they provide context to the projects of Wiman, Berry, and Robinson.

While many construals of secularism can sound fairly abstract and theoretical, Taylor tries to counter this impulse by describing and analyzing what he terms the "social imaginary," which is less a coherent system of thought than it is "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings."[91] Taylor is trying to give an account not for intellectual history (alone), but for how experience is lived, and lived by a tacit understanding of the world that is pretheoretical. Much of the archeological work of *A Secular Age* involves Taylor's digging through "images,

[88] *How (Not) to be Secular*, 22.
[89] *A Secular Age,* 18. Taylor also makes sure to point out that "of no previous society was this true" (18).
[90] Ibid, 140.
[91] *A Secular Age,* 171.

stories, legends,"[92] to uncover how this social imaginary has changed, slowly and subtly, over time to lead us to this particular moment.

The most notable change in the secular$_3$ social imaginary, at least for Taylor, is that it has now become entirely plausible to construct meaning and significance without any reference to the transcendent. This is obviously a far cry from the premodern, Medieval social imaginary "in which atheism is unthinkable."[93] Taylor maintains that there were three primary obstacles to unbelief that characterized the Medieval social imaginary and, therefore, kept unbelief implausible. Again, these obstacles were pretheoretical, part of the furniture of the Classical and Medieval imagination very broadly understood.

The first obstacle was that the natural world was understood to be a cosmos that was ordered and functioned semiotically, pointing beyond itself to what was *more than* nature; the second obstacle was the belief that society was grounded in a "higher reality," all "earthly kingdoms were grounded in a heavenly kingdom"; finally, the third obstacle to unbelief was that people understood themselves to inhabit an enchanted world that was "charged with presences," and the self was "open and vulnerable" to their activity.[94] Particularly the first and third points here are important to keep in mind when we turn to Wiman, Berry, and Robinson and the counter "social imaginary" on offer in their works, "social imaginaries" that, I will argue, have important ecological implications.

Taylor then explores the consequences of disenchantment as a central feature of the secular social imaginary, clarifying how this new "default understanding" not only affected how the world is understood, but what place humans have in it. The "dis-godding" of the universe

[92] Ibid, 172.
[93] *How (Not) to be Secular,* 27.
[94] *A Secular Age*, 25.

does not only remove God and spirit and leave us with some machine-like material world. Taylor argues that what actually shifted was the *location* of meaning from the outer world to the inner mind.[95] Smith helpfully explains that "to sense the force of this shift, we need to appreciate how this differs from the 'enchanted' premodern imaginary where all kinds of nonhuman things mean—are loaded and charged with meaning—independent of human perception and attribution."[96]

Taylor introduces two more important words in his lexicon to help readers better understand this shift from the premodern to modern imaginary when it comes to a lived mythology of disenchantment, and these terms relate to the type of self we understand ourselves to be in relation to the world of things. In the premodern, enchanted world, Taylor claims, the social imaginary involved a "porous self," one "open to an outside (whether benevolent or malevolent), open to blessing or curse, possession or grace."[97] The premodern self is open to forces and intelligences that do not originate in the mind but communicate to us nevertheless.

The modern social imaginary, however, replaces the porous self (and, by extension, the haunting nature of an intelligent, communicative non-human reality) with what Taylor terms the "buffered self," a self that is "insulated and isolated in its interiority."[98] The myth of disenchantment involves not simply a re-location of meaning away from things and into the mind, but an entirely new concept of the mind and the self *in relation to* those things. There is an ecological dimension to all of this. The porous self knows no hard edge between the subjective inner world and the objective, exterior world. Indeed, for Taylor the premodern porous self

[95] Ibid, 31.
[96] *How (Not) to be Secular,* 29.
[97] Ibid
[98] *A Secular Age,* 37.

consists of a "very different existential condition."[99] As will become clear—particularly with Wiman and Robinson—the postsecular counter-narratives of re-enchantment will have to negotiate this turn inward, often employing it in service to the articulation of new myths.

This is not, for Taylor, so much an abstract, intellectual position as it is a lived reality. Such a self not only remains *open* to, but experiences "a landscape that is alive, aware, and expressive."[100] In other words, the porous self exists alongside an enchanted world. While such a self, from our vantage, might seem unreasonably fearful of a material world that is largely beyond control and comprehension, such fear appropriately attends a humbler posture towards a nature charged with non-human meaning, life, and intelligence. The porous self is not simply a being who experiences a world filled with gods and spirits; rather, the porous self is characterized by *a stance* towards the world of being "at attention."[101] If the world possesses forms of meaning and contains a form of non-human intelligence, it is not a world one *stands over;* it is a world one seeks to understand. It is not something one takes, but something one receives.

The secular condition Taylor maps out, guides one through the writing of Wiman, Berry, and Robinson, particularly in terms of how their ecological insights about the nature of material reality are always contextualized within the contested space of belief and doubt that mark the secular$_3$, or the secular age. In the following chapters, I will move through the poetry and essays of Wiman, and then the novels and essays of Robinson and Berry to indicate that in our current moment, Christian ecological, literary thought has been conditioned *by* the secular age to

[99] Ibid, 38.

[100] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More than Human World* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 139.

[101] See Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2015), 5.

articulate counter myths of re-enchantment meant to envision a different way of inhabiting this world.

Wiman, Berry, and Robinson each experience and give expression to what Taylor calls the "cross pressure"[102] of the secular age, the space of tension between a pure immanence (of the disenchanted world) and a haunting transcendence (of a re-enchanted world). This cross pressure creates poignant moments of "fragilization"[103] in which the myth of a disenchanted world becomes tenuous, doubtable, unsatisfactory. After such moments, other possibilities open up.

Which brings us back to the question of *dis*-ease and malaise. The myth of disenchantment has led to significant moments of fragilization in an Anthropocene beset by ecological destruction. Taylor never uses the term "myth" in reference to disenchantment, but when he talks about "spins" versus "takes" in *A Secular Age*, he is arguably in agreement with the way I am employing the term in this opening chapter and throughout the remainder of this project.

Taylor's framing of the secular maintains that for religious or irreligious people, the issue is never whether or not we inhabit the immanent frame, but *how*. Taylor offers two broad options, both of which are, again, usually pre-theoretical. The first option is to accept that you have a "take"[104] on things, which means that you recognize that how you understand the world is always contested and contestable. A "take" is, Taylor suggests, a "[William] Jamesian open space [where] you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief."[105] Obviously

[102] *A Secular Age,* 309.
[103] Ibid, 304.
[104] Ibid, 549.
[105] Ibid. For more on this see Charles Taylor*, The Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

for Taylor this can unsettle fundamentalists on both sides of the religious-irreligious divide, but is a much healthier (albeit more fraught) position to inhabit.

When people fail to understand their positions and perceptions as dependent on a "take" on—or a myth of—reality, they are susceptible to "spin," which Taylor notes "is a way of convincing oneself that one's reading is obvious, compelling, allowing of no cavil or demurral."[106] Taylor believes it is a rather unfortunate situation that the Academy in particular is most given to the "spin of closure"[107] in which a secular fundamentalism fails to see that the "closed reading" is, indeed, just another reading. The immanent frame and even the disenchanted world are, to use Midgley's language, myths by which we live. They are powerful, but also susceptible to contestation and counter-myths. Although Taylor does not use this language, Smith gets closer by suggesting that "Taylor is bent on demythologizing the supposed 'naturalness' of the take (spin?)"[108] of the secular$_2$ narrative that puts religion in conflict with science, belief in conflict with reason.

In American literature of the past several decades, it seems that there is a growing interest in the fraught spaces of the secular age. Contemporary fiction reveals new negotiations between faith and doubt, religion and science in the contemporary social imaginary. John McClure makes note of a significant "postsecular" trend in contemporary fiction that gives voice to the dissatisfactions arising with contemporary secular thought. In response and reaction, American authors are providing "religiously inflected alternatives to secularism."[109] (As noted above, "p*ost*secular" in this context is specifically post-Secular$_2$ as defined by Taylor; that is, it is "post" the type of secularization that sees a waning of religious belief as societies become more modern

[106] *A Secular Age,* 551.
[107] Ibid, 549.
[108] *How (Not) to be Secular,* 97.
[109] McClure, 7.

and technologically advanced.) The "religiously inflected" visions of reality on offer in contemporary postsecular fiction, McClure notes, do not shun, but rather draw on the resources of religious tradition, but offer no simple return to a lost, pre-modern, golden age of naive belief. McClure categorizes postsecular fiction by attributing to it the following characteristics:

> [T]he stories it tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious; its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of the secular constructions of the real; and because its ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects.[110]

The writing of Wiman, Robinson, and Berry are unique from each other and do not all entirely fit this description of postsecular literature equally. However, they all challenge "secular constructions of the real" via "religiously inflected disruptions"[111] and, thus, can be considered postsecular under McClure's framing.

How "weakened" their religiosity is would likely be a matter of contention and, ultimately, subjective perspective.[112] However, McClure's framing of postsecular American fiction explains just why Wiman, Robinson, and Berry occupy such a precarious position in the contested space of the secular age. Each of these writers are not comfortable among America's religious establishment communities—what McClure terms "fundamentalists"[113]— nor are they at home among the strict materialists whose visions of the world they challenge. When McClure

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[110] Ibid, 3.

[111] Ibid

[112] It is helpful that McClure does not limit "postsecular" writing to the past several decades. In fact, in his introduction, McClure notes that that the modernists, transcendentalists, and even early Romantics were all "postsecular" in their attempts to disrupt secular constructions of the real. McClure, 3.

[113] He does note that this is a disputed term. For his purposes, however, he draws on Gabriel Almond's work *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*, making the claim that fundamentalism is a religious resurgence that requires a "uniformity of belief and practice" centered upon shared and incontestable "doctrines and codes" (20). While there are still some quibbles I would make with this framing, it is helpful to explain why Wiman, Robinson, and Berry all find themselves ill-at-ease in such fundamentalist communities so defined.

claims that postsecular characters occupy an "ideologically mixed and confusing middle zone,"[114] this is precisely the space of Taylor's secular$_3$, a space of contested and contestable "myths" about reality.

In *Varieties of Religion Today*, Charles Taylor argues that an "essential feature of our divided age" is how "intimations and intuitions" of a "profound desire that has been ignored" of "some greater reality that has been closed off by secularism"[115] haunts many. McClure suggests that this puts many in the "border zone between the secular and religious" which is "producing new, complexly hybridized forms of thought and life."[116] The prompting towards such new forms of thought and life are often felt strongest "when worldly life becomes intolerable."[117] At the opening of this introductory chapter I noted that the malaise of the Anthropocene is, indeed, experienced as one such moment of ecological reckoning, leading many to consider postsecular myths of re-enchantment.

In what follows I want to look closely at the life and work of the three aforementioned American writers, each of whom narrates a postsecular myth of re-enchantment within confessional, Christian lines. Each of these writers articulates a vision of the real within the fraught tensions of the secular age between belief and unbelief and between otherworldly Christian theologies and strictly materialist accounts skeptical and suspicious of public manifestations of religious belief.

As I noted above, there is a narrative arc to this project. In the next chapter, my reading of the poetry and prose of Christian Wiman will focus almost explicitly on two his works: the poetry collection *Every Riven Thing* and the prose essays in *My Bright Abyss*. Within these

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[114] McClure, 4.
[115] *Varieties of Religion Today,* 56 – 57.
[116] McClure, 10.
[117] Ibid

works, Wiman unfolds his own journey as a poet who wrestles with the claims of Christianity on what is real and struggles through what that means for his cancer diagnosis. In his preface to *My Bright Abyss*, Wiman articulates well the postsecular tension of someone who is "frustrated with the language and forms of contemporary American religion" yet "nevertheless feels the burn of being that drives us out of ourselves, that insistent, persistent gravity of the ghost called God."[118] Wiman's attention to "language and forms" become the crack in the secular through which he begins to rearticulate what the "real" is in a world where meaningful communication is even possible. More than this, Wiman is fascinated by the ways in which the material world invokes the human desire to respond to it and then exceeds the human ability to speak for it. By attending to this aspect of material reality, Wiman discounts some of the post-Enlightenment theories of representational language that assume postures of mastery and control in favor of a theory that submits to contingency, partial knowledge, and a posture marked by humility and awe. Primarily through these two works, Wiman begins to articulate a distinctly this-worldly theological vision in which language becomes a key site of re-enchantment in the secular age. Meaningful, poetic communication, for Wiman, is how humans can find their place in the world, re-embedded with the earth, with each other, and with the creative source of meaning that makes communication possible.

In Marilynne Robinson's essays and primarily in her novel *Gilead*, we come across a writer who is not only serious about the Christianity she identifies with, but also about the findings of astrophysics and quantum science. Both, according to Robinson, help to reveal the unsatisfactory nature of disenchantment as a secular explanation of the real. By looking closely at her collection of essays in *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern*

[118] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2013), viii.

Myth of the Self, Robinson articulates her most strident argument against a disenchanted materialism that has completely rejected the importance of the human soul, the site, in Robinson's rendering, of our experience of the world. For Robinson, taking experience seriously—something the phenomenologists of the twentieth century did—re-opens one to the claims of Christian belief in a secular age. In the novel *Gilead* Robinson voices the experience and inward self of the dying pastor John Ames. Through his collection of fragmented letters to his son, Ames not only imparts deathbed wisdom, but reveals a rich inner life that is steeped in Christian thought and deeply attentive to and affectionate for "this life, this world."[119] But Robinson's novel is not simply a call to attention and love for the material world, but for an entirely new postsecular myth of re-enchantment. Through Ames, Robinson explores life experienced as if the natural world were both a gracious gift and the theatre of God's grandeur and glory. In *Gilead*, Robinson creates a narrator who embodies the "porous self" that Charles Taylor speaks about, but he is only made possible by a re-narration, a re-mythologizing, of what this world might be.

Finally, the fiction and essays of Wendell Berry explore the rather troubling question of Christianity's cultural mandate that explicitly commands humans to dominate and control the world. Particularly in the Anthropocene, this aspect of Christian theology needs to be understood if any Christian re-enchantment is supposed to offer a more healing narrative. As noted earlier, scholars like John Milbank, James K.A. Smith, and even Charles Taylor, argue that this understanding of the cultural mandate is largely a post-Enlightenment (mis)reading of Genesis. Through Berry's writing, a new agrarian hermeneutic can be applied to this passage in ways that help render it, in a postsecular context, as a new way to envision the human-nature relationship.

[119] *Gilead,* 9.

Indeed, for Berry the Genesis call to work in the world is the essential thrust of a Christian myth of re-enchantment.

One of the most drastic consequences of disenchantment in terms of our ecological relationship to the earth has been the rise of disembodied, abstract forms of life and practice and the general disembedding of humans set apart from the world. Yet Wendell Berry's essays, and particularly his novel *Jayber Crow*, explore a new form of life and a new way of perceiving the world as the home humanity must cultivate and live within through faithful loving work.

Of course, the visions presented by writers like Wiman, Robinson, and Berry, will likely not satisfy everyone. But that is inevitable in the secular age where various takes on reality are not only deeply contingent on deeply held beliefs, but they are contestable and, should be, contested.

CHAPTER TWO: CHRISTIAN WIMAN

Postsecular Ways to Say God

As noted in the previous chapter, subtraction narratives of secularization assume that secularization is the steady decline and eventual disappearance of religious belief as civilization modernizes and separates itself from religious experience and even the language of belief. Yet such narratives, I argue in the previous chapter, are inadequate for explaining the ongoingness and even growth of religious belief and practice in contemporary American culture. They are also inadequate for explaining the persistence of conversions *to* religious belief in the secular age. Conversion experiences are significant because, in the context of this project, they involve a transformation and revaluation of the myths by which one lives. Conversions, in the secular age, can help reveal the delineations of particularly postsecular myths of re-enchantment.

It might go without saying, but religious conversions are also not a one-way street in the secular age. Conversions *away from* belief are possible. In fact, Taylor's project is keenly interested in why such conversions are much more likely now than they were five centuries earlier. Taylor is clear that the tension, or cross pressure, comes from both sides, creating "a pressure between the draw of narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other[120] […] We are torn between an anti-Christian thrust and a repulsion towards some (to Christians) extreme form of reduction."[121] Taylor is not denying that conversions away from religion and towards a more secular or even atheistic materialism happen. They often do. Taylor is more intrigued, however, with how even these conversions can

[120] Ibid, 595.
[121] Ibid, 599.

occur under the exact same cross pressures. This, for Taylor, is a way of understanding the fraught tensions of (un)belief in the secular age. Being haunted by the possibilities of contested and contestable narratives, or myths, is for Taylor what life in a secular age is fundamentally about.

These moments of felt cross-pressure (and even consequent conversions), Taylor argues, are not proofs of anything; rather they are merely indications that there might be something more—or other—behind the appearances than a human can know by means of positivism or verification. Yet such moments of cross pressure destabilize the myth of disenchantment and lead some to ultimately "break out of the immanent frame."[122] Taylor provides a litany of individuals, such as Ivan Illich and Jacques Maritain, as exemplars of what a conversion to Christianity in the secular age might *feel* like. Most of these conversions are initiated by a felt malaise, or uneasiness, that certain closed takes—whether fundamentalist Christianity, or secular, materialistic science—are inadequate to make sense of certain aspects of lived experience.

One of the most poignant sites for such malaise is the confrontation with physical suffering and the reality of death.[123] Taylor argues that in the face of death, humans feel the cross pressure as a potent desire for eternity, a yearning for there to be a more-ness to this life and this world that is "not trivial or childish."[124] As material animals, humans know death is inescapable, but in many cases "the sense that there is something more presses in."[125] A Christian convert, for Taylor, is someone who responds to this pressure by becoming open to another "take" on reality that includes what humans have defined as immanent *and* transcendent expressions of reality.

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[122] *A Secular Age*, 728.
[123] Ibid, 720.
[124] Ibid, 722.
[125] Ibid, 722.

Such cross pressures, Taylor maintains, not only fragilize one's "take" on reality, but can lead to a "nova effect," which is an "explosion of different options ('third ways') for belief and meaning."[126] Understanding these conversions as "third ways" is a helpful reminder that these are no simple *recoveries* of premodern Christian belief or vocabulary. As I argued in the first chapter, re-enchantment does not require a conversion to Christianity or some other religion. There is no going back to enchantment, only the possibility of a re-enchantment that will be an evolutionary expression of the inherited reality.

Taylor's insights regarding conversion are reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur's work, which among other things is an attempt to articulate how Christianity manifests itself in a secular context and desacralized world. For Ricoeur religious studies no longer simply needed "rationalist justifications [or] a confessionalist defense of traditional doctrines."[127] Rather, Ricoeur placed a "premier value on mythopoetic forms of expression […] for understanding the meaning of human being in a world charged with the presence and absence of the sacred."[128] But recovering a new mythopoetic structure—for Ricoeur, this is Christianity—is not simply a matter of returning to the realm of what he called "primitive [or first] naivete."[129] Ricoeur maintains that no such return is possible:

> In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a *second naivete* in and through criticism. In short, it is by interpreting that we can hear again."[130]

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[126] *How (Not) to be Secular,* 142.

[127] Mark Wallace, "Introduction." *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination.*, Paul Ricoeur (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 4.

[128] Ibid, 4 – 5.

[129] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil.* Trans. Emerson Buchanon (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 349

[130] Ibid, 350.

It is for this reason that fiction and poetry are so significant in the secular age because they contain the possibilities for ushering in new postsecular mythologies—or what Taylor would call "open takes"—and their attendant symbolisms and vocabularies for a *second naivete* of belief. And even if the "first naivete of primordial openness to religious symbolism has long been lost to modern people," it is in contemporary fiction and poetry where this "second naivete of belief founded on the traces of the sacred in the world of the text is possible."[131] Enchantment is no longer possible, only re-enchantment. Such conversions to new lived mythologies, I maintain, provide postsecular ways of saying God, and as we will see in Wiman's poetry, this way of saying God is fundamentally (and quite literally) grounded in connecting God as a real presence in the material world. This involves reformulations of old beliefs into new language.

These conversions are distinctly postsecular and more akin to what John McClure in *Partial Faiths* calls "partial conversions" that "do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief [but rather] strand those who experience them in ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones."[132] Indeed, these middle zones are precisely the space of the postsecular, where religion and secularism co-exist and generate new options. These postsecular forms of Christianity react against post-Enlightenment privileging to objective knowledge, rationalism, certainty and an autonomy that disembeds humans from the natural world. Such values have affected both science and other forms of Christianity in the modern world. However, in these "middle zones" of postsecular conversion, one does not find strident dogmatists, but rather religious converts comfortable with uncertainty, contingency, and

[131] Wallace, 2.
[132] McClure, 4.

even doubt, seeking "to reconcile secular and religious intuitions"[133] rather than merely pit them against one another.

Taylor's exploration of the cross pressure experienced by a realization of death in the secular age helps contextualize my particular interest in the life and writing of the American poet and essayist Christian Wiman. At the age of 39, after years of working as a poet, journalist, and the editor of *Poetry* magazine, Wiman was diagnosed with a rare and incurable form of blood cancer. The cancer and its treatment brought on years of intense physical pain and suffering for the middle-aged poet. In *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*, Wiman documents his bodily suffering and evolving faith during these years, writing after one particularly harrowing treatment that "[the hospital] skinned me on the inside, leaving me so bloody and abraded from mouth to bowels that I couldn't even eat an aspirin."[134] Multiple times Wiman was brought to the brink of his physical limits, confronting death "that crashing cataract that comes to us, from this distance, as the white noise of life, that *ur-despair* that underlies all the little prickly irritations and anxieties that alcohol is engineered to erase."[135]

Wiman's brushes with death are a rather stark confrontation with the dis-ease of bodily, material life. Yet for Wiman, I argue, this nearness to death profoundly shaped his conversion to Christianity, and a distinctly postsecular vision and vocabulary for a re-enchanted world. As will become clear in this chapter, Wiman's postsecular form of Christianity leads him to a radical love of and attention to material, this-worldly existence.

In one of Taylor's explorations of conversion, he deals closely with a figure who inspired Wiman: Gerard Manley Hopkins. Taylor maintains that Hopkins' poetry provides a way out of

[133] Ibid, 6.
[134] *My Bright Abyss,* 176 – 177.
[135] Ibid, 67.

the closures of the immanent frame and, thus, a way towards potential re-enchantment. As I noted in the previous chapter, this might seem anachronistic, but postsecular writers are not merely writing "after" secularism, but against it. Therefore, "post" might be an unhelpful prefix since it suggests a temporality to such projects that have much longer historical roots. Nevertheless, Taylor's fascination with Hopkins is that some of the post-Romantic theories of poetry provided a *way out* of the myth of disenchantment and its stance of control over the natural world. Poetry, Taylor argues, is "performative," and as such it "creates symbols and makes new meanings. Poetry is a kind of world making."[136] Taylor even argues that this view of poetry helped it escape more scientific and rationalist theories of representation and designation in which words were understood to have a desired univocity between signifier and signified.[137] The Romantic "take" on poetic language is that it creates "ruptures in the immanent frame."[138]

Language, in this formulation, reveals realities that can resonate with readers; however, this creates the possibility that a re-enchanted reality that disrupts the immanent frame also depends on the audience: "The language may go dead, flat, become routinized, a handy tool of reference, a commonplace, like a dead metaphor."[139] Taylor is fascinated that this leads to a modern obsession with finding "new languages that can resonate within us."[140] Again, these words echo those of Ricoeur, who believed that the metaphorical imagination was essential to articulating faith because "metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the

[136] *A Secular Age,* 756.
[137] Ibid, 758.
[138] Ibid
[139] Ibid
[140] Ibid, 759. This becomes the theme of one of Taylor's next project *The Language Animal*, which, in an earlier iteration of this project consumed a lot more attention here. In that book, Taylor explores much more closely the various moves that took place to shape the post-Enlightenment theories of language of representation and the Romantic challenges to those theories which, among many other things, opened up the pathways for taking poetic and religious language seriously and making the experience of re-enchantment a process of inhabiting the right language. For more on this, see: Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of Human Linguistic Capacity* (Belknap: Harvard University Press, 2016).

power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality."[141] Words do not grasp material reality, at least not fully. Rather, in their attempt to reveal it they encounter an excessiveness they are inadequate to speak for. What accounts for this? In the postsecular theological vision of Wiman, this is because material reality is inextricably linked to its source. More, the material world is the *ongoing* language of the Creator. Human language, in such a theocentric frame, is but a participant in this broader, cosmological communication.

Wiman's poetic language is an invitation not merely for new descriptors of God in a secular age, but into a new form of life in which such language's ability to speak about reality seems possible. The beginnings of this new language are recorded in "Love Bade Me Welcome," an essay written one year after Wiman's diagnosis and then included in his collection *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet*. Wiman's initial impressions of his conversion are significant for laying out the contours of the postsecular, this-worldly theological vision that comes to dominate the prose and poetry of Wiman's later work. Wiman's conversion is not simply a conversion from an atheistic materialism, but *also* from the excarnational form of Christianity in which he was raised and eventually left. Wiman's conversion is to a new form of faith, a *second naivete,* that stems from being dissatisfied by both of these ways of life for similar reasons. While lengthy, this passage from "Love Bade Me Welcome" is worth quoting in full:

> …one morning we found ourselves going to church. […] What I remember of that Sunday, though, and of the Sundays that immediately followed, is less the services themselves than the walks we took afterwards, and less the specifics of the conversations we had about God, always about God, than the moments of silent, and what felt like sacred, attentiveness those conversations led to: an iron sky and the lake so calm it

[141] Paul Ricouer, *The Rule of Metaphor,* trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 7.

> seemed thickened; the El blasting past with its rain of sparks and brief, lost faces; the broad leaves and white blooms of a catalpa on our street, Grace Street, and under the tree a seethe of something that was just barely still a bird, quick with life beyond its own.
>
> I was brought up with the poisonous notion that you had to renounce love of the earth in order to receive the love of God. My experience has been just the opposite: a love of the earth and existence so overflowing that it implied, or included, or even absolutely demanded, God. Love did not deliver me from the earth, but into it.[142]

This essay gives voice to Wiman's distinctly postsecular rendering of Christianity. In the wake of the devastating reality of his cancer, Wiman and his new wife are inexplicably drawn to a church, upending their more secularized Sunday routines.[143] Death and physical suffering are the points of cross pressure in which Wiman considers and accepts the possibility of an encounter with "the ghost called God."[144] Death puts a crack in his buffered self, rendering him more porous, more open, to the possibilities of the transcendent.

But this God is not simply an illusory salve for his psychological and physical wounds. The particular form of Christianity Wiman articulates provides no simple consolations of escaping to another immaterial and disembodied world free of pain and suffering. Indeed, Wiman even acknowledges that the "first service was excruciating, in that it seemed to tear all wounds wide open."[145] Wiman's draw to God and the Christian faith is accompanied by embracing this-world in all its pain and suffering in contradistinction to the "poisonous" form of world-renouncing faith he grew up within and later rejected.

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[142] Christian Wiman, "Love Bade Me Welcome." *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 243 – 244.

[143] One thinks of Wallace Stevens (a secular, atheist poet Wiman admires) and his poem "Sunday Morning." See Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning." *Poetry Foundation.* Online. Accessed August 2020: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/13261/sunday-morning

[144] *My Bright Abyss,* viii.

[145] "Love Bade Me Welcome," 243.

"Love Bade me Welcome" is a prime example of how postsecular renderings of the Christian faith remain, as literary critic Lori Branch argues, "constituted by the logic of secularism"[146] in the sense that they are "this worldly" and not offering some escape hatch to an otherworldly heaven. In Wiman's case, Christianity answers a poignant desire to live in *this* particular world, even if it burns his flesh.

In the following chapter, I will look more closely at the body of writing that follows Wiman's conversion to Christianity in the secular age. I will focus primarily on the essays in the fragmented, autobiographical *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer* and Wiman's collection of poems *Every Riven Thing*. I maintain that these two works, written in close proximity to one another and to Wiman's diagnosis and conversion, interact with each other in productive ways that help readers interpret the poetic and theological project Wiman is undertaking as a self-described "modern believer." The ecological aspects of Wiman are muted, to be sure, and it might seem like his writing is far afield from the concerns I raised in regard to the Anthropocene context at the outset. However, I want to reiterate that his work reveals a first step in articulating a *this-worldly* theological vision that is shared by the more ecologically vocal writers like Robinson and Berry. Wiman establishes a helpful first step in understanding how postsecular Christianity moves towards a new myth of re-enchantment. How this informs one's experience of the world is more pronounced in Marilynne Robinson's works, and how this, finally, shapes one's land-use and place-making is more pronounced in the writing of Wendell Berry.

[146] Lori Branch, "Postsecular Studies," *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion.* Ed. Mark Knight (New York: Routledge, 2016), 96.

My Bright Abyss: A Postsecular Form of Belief

As a poet, Wiman's provision of a new myth of re-enchantment comes not in the form of narrative fiction as is the case with Robinson and Berry. Rather, Wiman's project is concerned more with finding a new language and poetics of belief adequate to the context of twenty-first century secular culture. When I turn to look more closely at some of the poems in *Every Riven Thing*, I argue that Wiman's postsecular language for a re-enchanted reality in which God remains present is grounded in the physical, material world. The reason for this move is articulated more clearly in *My Bright Abyss*, the fragmentary collection of essays Wiman composed during a long period of writer's block (at least concerning poetry) following his cancer diagnosis and his return to a different form of Christianity. In this collection, Wiman reveals that his conversion is no simple recovery project of Christianity or an apologetic to rationalize how and why God allows suffering and pain. Rather, Wiman provides an articulation of a distinctly postsecular form of Christianity that challenges a disenchanted materialism, but also modern forms of Christianity that have denied the world and favored abstract, propositional doctrine over attention (and affection) for this world.

Wiman opens *My Bright Abyss* by referring to the aforementioned essay, "Love Bade Me Welcome."[147] Wiman writes that this earlier essay was "about despair: losing the ability to write, falling in love, receiving a diagnosis of an incurable cancer, having my heart ripped apart by what, slowly and in spite of all my modern secular instincts, I learned to call God."[148] Wiman's "secular instincts" are significant, particularly as, I argue, they transform throughout

[147] The title for this essay derives from George Herbert's poem "Love (III)" in which Herbert writes, "Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back." Wiman is fascinated by this tension between our desire for love, yet inability to make ourselves open and vulnerable to it. Again, as noted in the previous chapter, such "postsecular" impulses are in no way constrained to the present moment.

[148] *My Bright Abyss,* vii.

this series of essays into postsecular instincts that lead him to seek a new language for faith in an age in which God is the "ghost"[149] who continues to haunt those who no longer believe in or experience Him as a real presence. And this language for faith and for God, Wiman realizes after the deluge of letters he received in response to his unlikely conversion, is something that many contemporary Americans desire. He writes:

> There is an enormous contingent of thoughtful people in this country who, though they are frustrated with the language and forms of contemporary American religion, nevertheless feel that burn of being that drives us out of ourselves, that insistent, persistent gravity of the ghost called God. I wanted to try to speak to these people more directly. I wanted to write a book that might help someone who is at once as confused and certain about the source of life and consciousness as I am.[150]

Wiman already has contemporary forms of American religion in his critical sights. Yet what he moves towards is, like Taylor, the *experience* of religion rather than just the doctrine or teaching. This move leads him to embrace the paradox of being both "confused and certain."[151]

Being at home in uncertainty, a position Wiman articulates several times in *My Bright Abyss*, situates him clearly within the postsecular framework that John McClure lays out. Wiman is obviously no fictional character, yet his life and ideas contain several important postsecular traits that McClure finds in contemporary American fiction. There is a conversion of a "secular-minded character back toward the religious," a "religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real," and, finally, a "weakened religiosity."[152]

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[149]Ibid
[150] Ibid, viii.
[151] Ibid
[152] McClure, 3.

A "weakened religiosity," to clarify, is, for McClure, a form of religious belief which is open to doubt and uncertainty as opposed to "stronger" forms of dogmatic, religious fundamentalism scaffolded with propositions of absolute truth. "Christ is contingency," Wiman tells a 65-year-old woman, Adele, who has "lost" her faith; "Contingency. Meaning subject to chance, not absolute. Meaning uncertain, as reality, right down to the molecular level, is uncertain. As all of human life is uncertain."[153] Wiman is acutely aware that to "think of God in these explicitly immanent terms might seem for some people deeply troubling (not to mention heretical),"[154] but what Wiman is after is a God who is always deeply attendant and active and present in this material world, not "floating over the chaos of pain and particles in which we're mired […] gliding among our ancestors like some shiny sinless superhero."[155] If God exists and is to "mean anything"[156] for real human experience, then he must be embedded in material existence as humans know it. This is a far remove from post-Enlightenment Deisms. However, God is also invisible, silent, absent, and transcendent. He is a ghost who has, seemingly, gone. This creates tension that opens one up to living with a faith couched in uncertainty.

Lori Branch picks up on how uncertainty manifests itself in postsecular belief with a helpful focus on language. Drawing on Derrida, Branch asserts that "faith and knowledge configured as opposites in the Enlightenment; [however] the binary by which Enlightenment knowledge defines itself over and above belief is impossible to maintain because faith haunts the very nature of language."[157] Branch, via Derrida, is referring to the linguistic turn in philosophy that, after Saussure and Wittgenstein revealed "the most important matters we all interpret and

[153] *My Bright Abyss,* 16.
[154] Ibid, 16 – 17.
[155] Ibid, 17.
[156] Ibid
[157] Branch, 98. She is referring to Jacques Derrida. *Limited, Inc.,* trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

believe with reasons better or worse but never sufficient to constitute proof or to relieve our responsibility for belief, interpretation, and action, when we might always have chosen otherwise."[158] Branch's insight here opens a path for understanding Wiman's own comfort with the relativism and contingency of his postsecular Christian belief.

This postsecular space opens up a "middle zone" in which Wiman's liminal position between religious and irreligious fundamentalisms. Both sides claim a language for God that assumes certainty about His existence or non-existence. Yet both sides of this equation, according to Wiman, have an inadequate language for the real experiences of God which are always couched in uncertainty. These experiences do not occur outside of material existence on some mystical plane of transcendence but are grounded in the confrontation and encounter with material reality by limited, material creatures.

In the next chapter I will look much more closely at the important role of experience and why phenomenology opens up the possibility for religious belief in the writing of Marilynne Robinson. However, with Wiman, my intention is less to explore the importance of his experiences and more to explore how such religious experiences are transcribed in a new language. As Paul Ricouer notes in "Philosophy and Religious Language,": "Whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression."[159] And as Rowan Williams, theologian and literary critic, recently suggests in his Gifford lectures, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, when we closely attend to how our language interacts with our material experience, we come to

[158] Ibid

[159] Paul Ricouer, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination.* Trans. David Pellauer. Ed Mark Wallace (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 35.

realize the limits—or edges—of representationalist accounts of language since language suggests "an abundant or excessive reality engulfing our mental actives."[160]

For Williams (and for Wiman), attending closely to how language and material reality interact open up a space for new ways of saying—or trying to say—God in the contemporary world. This requires entering the postsecular middle zone where experience cross-pressures us to speak for a reality whose meanings exceed our linguistic capabilities. In *My Bright Abyss*, Wiman explores how his suffering and his proximity to death reveal the limits of disenchanted materialism, but also the failures of fundamentalist Christianity to speak for and about God. After exposing those, Wiman articulates his "third way," which I argue is his way of re-enchantment.

For Wiman, the limitations of a disenchanted materialism are made apparent through the cross-pressure of his imminent death. The myth of disenchantment fails to provide a satisfactory answer to the longing humans have that death is not ultimately meaningless. This is a longing that unites Christian and atheist; Wiman argues,

> we, the living, want to believe in this possibility: that death could be filled with promise, that the pain of leaving and separation could be, if not a foretaste of joy, then at least not meaningless. […] Forget religion. Even atheists want to die well, or want those they love to die well, which has to mean more than simply a quiet resignation to complete annihilation."[161]

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[160] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), xii. Rowan Williams also, in very postsecular fashion, acknowledges that his lectures are not "a new and knockdown argument for the existence of God," but rather an attempt to think about what we are doing when we try to say God as material creatures. This, he maintains, will likely leave many people "puzzled." (xiii). All that to say, Williams is fine in the realm of uncertainty and not after dogmatic propositions, but hermeneutical explorations.

[161] *My Bright Abyss,* 50.

Wiman is ill at ease with the "polite nihilism"[162] that undergirds secularism. "To say that there is nothing beyond this world that we see," Wiman says in reference to those operating under the myth of disenchantment, "is to make death the final authority of our lives and to sow a seed of meaninglessness into that very insight."[163] If death is to mean something, then God is. So Wiman wonders if there is a more satisfactory account in which one can die "into life rather than simply away from it."[164]

Wiman does not make an apologetic move towards a religious doctrine of heaven or the afterlife. To quote Marilynne Robinson, an author Wiman admires, Wiman is not "distracted by the supposed need to translate religion into terms a rationalist would be find meaningful."[165] Rather, Wiman is keenly interested in religious experience, and why human experience of life includes a longing for meaning. While death makes this longing more poignant, Wiman maintains that "to project ourselves beyond it is to violate not only the terms of this life, which include a clear-eyed awareness of the end no eye can pierce, but also, [he] suspect[s], of the next."[166] Just as he asserts there is an afterlife, Wiman undercuts the claim by admitting nothing about it can be known and to attempt that would violate its very terms. All language for heaven, Wiman asserts, will "sound preposterous to modern scientific sensibilities."[167]

For Wiman, death—and its relationship to religion—needs a reconfiguration, a new language, in contemporary writing. Wiman argues that death became prominent as a subject of art in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries precisely because of a rise of secularism

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[162] Ibid
[163] Ibid, 10.
[164] Ibid
[165] Marilynne Robinson, "That Highest Candle," *Poetry* 190.2 (2007), 135. Robinson goes on in the review to suggest that religion can only be articulated by way of experience, a theme I will pick up more fully in the next chapter.
[166] Ibid, 105.
[167] Ibid

that cast doubt on the very existence of God. Through such a radical shift in the conditions of belief, Wiman argues that "death became an ultimate concern [of writers like] Dickinson, Stevens, Beckett, and Camus – the great devotional poets of death."[168] Postmodernism, Wiman continues, reacted against this and "sought to eliminate death in the frenzy of the instant."[169] The way forward, Wiman argues, is to "imagine ourselves into and out of death"[170] because secularism has rendered it a meaningless return to the *nihil* from which humans emerge. While reductive materialism, for Wiman, might not satisfy the deepest longing for a life beyond this one, Wiman's "quite certain that the old religious palliatives, at least those related to the Christian idea of heaven, are [also] inadequate."[171] And if the secular narratives of modern life are limited, Wiman is equally (if not more) nonplussed by various forms of contemporary American Christianity.

Although *My Bright Abyss* is Wiman's meditation as a self-described modern believer, his critiques of Christianity are much more pronounced than his critiques of a disenchanted secularism. As I noted above, drawing on Lori Branch, Wiman's largest critique is against a form of Christianity that has been beholden to post-Enlightenment epistemological projects that have made it heavily dogmatic, apologetic, rationalistic, and reliant upon a language seeking to verify God with absolute certainty. Wiman worries that "the minute you begin to speak with certitude about God, he is gone."[172] In the secular age, Wiman understands that the posture of dogmatic certainty has made Christians forget the original experience, the "burn of being,"[173] which first haunted their lives as God's "first call."[174] Forgetting this experience, Wiman argues, "there is no

[168] Ibid, 50.
[169] Ibid
[170] Ibid
[171] Ibid
[172] Ibid, 72.
[173] Ibid, viii.
[174] Ibid, 71.

sense in arguing for God in order to convince others."[175] Wiman is not interested in the apologetic mode and rationalist stance of certain strains of Christianity.

This is not to say that Wiman is against dogma and doctrine, or traditional Christian teaching. He later notes that doctrine and dogma are the "ropes, clips, and toe spikes whereby one descends into the abyss"[176] of meaninglessness that all humans must confront. Wiman is not discarding the need for teaching, but framing it as the provisional foothold by which one moves, cautiously, through a world cloaked in uncertainty. What accomplishes this is when theological teaching is incarnated into the fresh expressions of living, poetic language. The problem for Wiman is when doctrine becomes rigid and inert through dead metaphors and a tired language, or the tool of fundamentalists meant to contain the uncontainable. When this happens, the footholds are no longer provisional touchpoints into the abyss, but clear-cut paths through life shearing it of uncertainty and mystery. This particular form of Christianity disenchants.

Such dead language about God and religious belief expose the rifts, even conflicts, between secular and religious people, but Wiman argues a third way is needed: "We need to be shocked out of our easy acceptance of—or facile resistance to—propositional language about God. Besides being useless as any definitive description of God, such language is simply not adequate for the intense and sacred spiritual turmoil that so many contemporary people feel."[177] Robinson will address this as well, but the inadequacy of language and propositions to fully speak for God and the resulting turmoil one feels because of this needs to be accepted, not suppressed. What shocks one into the possibility of this second naivete is a charged, new poetic language.

[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid, 117.
[177] Ibid, 138.

Confronting failed attempts to contain God within propositions, Rowan Williams points out, is a way that "language points us towards a dimension that systematically eludes final expression."[178] However, Williams maintains that even "our (quasi-)representing of God is least off the mark when we are furthest from anything that looks like a fully coherent schema."[179] This, for Williams, does not "excuse slackness" in trying to say God, but does make "an implicit case for our words about God to be—as it were—carefully calculated shocks."[180] Such poetic language understands its necessary limits, but still contains a dynamism and energy that can startle one to seeing the world and themselves in a strange new light. It is this type of language—this way of saying God—that marks Wiman's postsecular poetic expression of belief.

According to Wiman, Christian doctrine and language cannot be static but must remain dynamic and living. Such a living language is, for Wiman, connected to a living God. God as the living source of truth and life is why the experience and language of God always remains in flux. Wiman writes that "Truth inheres not in doctrine itself, but in the spirit with which it is engaged, for the spirit of God is always seeking and creating new forms."[181] For Wiman, if God is, then God is dynamic and moving and uncontainable by the imaginative and linguistic structures humans give.

But the very desire to say God, Wiman suggests, is itself a particular form of movement within the self. This movement that causes the poet and theologian to speak about God partially helps clarify Wiman's own distinction he makes between belief and faith:

> Faith is nothing more—but how much this is—than a motion of the soul toward God. It is not belief. Belief has objects […] faith does not. Even the motion of faith is mysterious

[178] Williams, 148.
[179] Ibid
[180] Ibid
[181] *My Bright Abyss,* 111.

> and inexplicable: I say the soul moves "toward" God, but that is only the limitation of language. It may be God who moves, the soul that opens for him. Faith is faith in the soul. Faith is the word "faith" decaying into pure meaning.[182]

If God is always on the move, as enacted in the poetic line, so too is the restless soul in search of a language that can speak for the transcendent experiences that rupture life in the immanent frame. Wiman names this restless movement *faith*. It surprises me that Amy Hungerford's work on *Postmodern Belief* makes no mention at all of Christian Wiman since her articulation of the postmodern shape of religious belief situates Wiman's restlessness and articulation of faith so precisely. While she is talking about the work of Mark C. Taylor, Hungerford's analysis is equally applicable to Wiman: "…the notion that God is on the run indicates both God's vitality and the vitality of the faith that sprints after him."[183] The "ghost of God" that haunts Wiman's conversion is such a moving God that moves Wiman.

The question, though, is where does this God on the move go? For Wiman, this is another large problem with contemporary American Christianity: God goes to some ambiguous heaven beyond the world. In one of his chapter titles, Wiman clearly suggests that "God is not beyond."[184] And Wiman maintains that "God is not absent. He is everywhere in the world we are too dispirited to love."[185] Assuming God's absence from this world—whether out of a secular materialism or a gnostic Christianity—relegates God to some otherworldly realm which is inaccessible to material creatures. In a way, such theories even within Christian faith, leave the world of physical objects disenchanted: God has gone from them.

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[182] Ibid, 139.
[183] Hungerford, 20.
[184] *My Bright Abyss,* 103.
[185] Ibid, 109.

Wiman's project is to get beyond this default disenchantment and articulate a vision of Christianity that remains open to mystery. However, mystery is one of these nebulous words in Christian and mystical traditions that, for Wiman, is part of the other-worldly disease that inflicts secularized forms of Christianity. "Nothing is more frustrating," Wiman argues, "than listening to an inept or unprepared preacher (or poet!) defer to the 'mystery' of existence and God when more mystery is the last thing in the world his words need or can bear."[186] Wiman is not opposed to mystery; however, in this particular register, Wiman argues, mystery "abstracts us from the physical world" and is thus "of the devil."[187] For Wiman mystery and mystical experiences of God are possible, but only if God is something (or someone) attached to this world: "What I crave—and what I have known, in fugitive instants—is mystery that utterly obliterates reality by utterly inhabiting it, some ultimate insight that is still sight. Heaven is precision."[188]

To challenge contemporary world-renouncing forms of Christianity, Wiman reframes mystery—especially the mystery of God—as remaining deeply contingent on the material world. He notes that "the meanings God calls for us […] does not demand a renunciation of life in favor of something beyond it. The call itself is always composed of life. […] It is life calling to life. […] Any meaning we arrive at in this life is composed of the irreducible details of the life that is around us at any moment."[189] For Wiman, a postsecular faith is grounded in a mystery of which this life and this world are participants.

To be a believer in the secular age, Wiman argues, one must believe "in a God who is not apart from matter (or not merely that) but part of it, a God who does not simply enjoin us to participate fully in life, and specifically in the relation within our lives, but a God who inheres

[186] Ibid, 117.
[187] Ibid, 117 – 118.
[188] Ibid, 118.
[189] Ibid, 94.

wholly within those relationships."[190] As will become more evident in Wiman's poetry, this is the form that re-enchantment takes in his Christian thought. Matter is meaningful not simply because the human mind constructs it to be so, but because matter and the human mind each participate in a greater, inherently meaningful reality of a God whom language cannot contain.

I maintain that *My Bright Abyss* provides Wiman's distinctly postsecular form of belief that is at home in uncertainty and challenges secular materialism and the forms of Christianity that have accepted various post-Enlightenment premises and been fixated on rational argument and other-worldly concerns. Yet Wiman's real attempt to reframe the world as something that participates in the dynamic being of God through a new, subtler, poetic language is a project he undertakes in *Every Riven Thing*, the collection of poems he wrote during the composition of *My Bright Abyss* as he struggled with his mortality and the conversion to a Christian myth by which to live.

***Every Riven Thing*: Naming the God that Goes**

Wiman's postsecular poetry of re-enchantment seeks to embed visionary, mystical experiences within material reality. Even Wiman's admission that he doesn't "respond as deeply to William Carlos Williams as [he does] to T.S. Eliot" is because poetry that is only concerned with things in the world does not have the visionary effect which is a "higher achievement."[191] Wiman goes on to argue, in language akin to Charles Taylor's, that the poet's task as he understands it is one deeply connected to a certain re-enchanted vision of the world and, furthermore, a responsibility to open up an audience to its possibility: "Some poets—surprisingly few—have a very particular gift for making a thing at once shine forth in its "thingness" and

[190] Ibid, 83.
[191] *My Bright Abyss,* 51.

ramify beyond its own dimensions. […] What happens [in such poems] is some mysterious resonance between thing and language, mind and matter, that reveals—and it does feel like revelation—a reality beyond the one we ordinary see."[192]

Wiman's use of mystery here is not simply the mysteriousness of human ignorance. Rather, it is the belief that the material world participates in a more complex ontological order that the human mind only grasps partially. As Wiman notes later, "To have faith is to acknowledge the absolute materiality of existence while acknowledging at the same time the compulsion toward transfiguring order that seems not outside of things but within them, and within you."[193] This view of mystery—one largely shared by Robinson and Berry—is connected to his myth of a re-enchanted reality.

And Wiman's myth of re-enchantment comes to us in the particular language and form of poetry. For Wiman, any acceptance or openness to a particularly Christian myth of re-enchantment in the secular age will require that one attempt to inhabit, or dwell within, communities of people who speak a certain language. "You can't know a religion from the outside," Wiman argues, "To have faith in a religion, any religion, is to accept at some primary level that its particular language of words and symbols says something true about reality."[194] Wiman is reticent to say these "words and symbols are reality (that's fundamentalism), nor that one will ever master those words and symbols well enough to regard reality as some fixed thing."[195] This, for Wiman, is the hermeneutical stance one might take to his poetry. To

[192] Ibid
[193]Ibid, 77.
[194] Ibid, 141.
[195] Ibid

understand the vision of reality he proposes requires one "submit to certain symbols and language that may be inadequate in order to have those inadequacies transcended."[196]

Poetry, in the language of this project, creates an interesting space in which a secular audience can feel the cross pressure that fragilizes the immanent frame and opens one up to new possibilities, a second naivete of belief by hearing a language infused by it. For Wiman, he is aware that his poems will likely not help most readers re-envision reality in such a way, but he maintains that, at least as a poet, "You have to believe that poetry has some reach into reality itself, or you have to go silent."

Silence is precisely where Wiman begins to rethink the function of his poetic language. In "A Piece of Prose," Wiman notes: "Of all the many and mostly noble reasons why a poet might turn to prose, there is one which is often primary, personal and occasionally conscious: it staves off the silence. […] The time between poems can become a time of some peril, of encroaching unreality and increasing confusion. It can seem like silence is steadily claiming everything."[197] Sure enough, the opening (and title) essay in the collection *My Bright Abyss* begins with such a moment of silence. Wiman, confronted by writer's block, is unable to complete the following poem:

> My God my bright abyss
> Into which all my longing will not go
> Once more I come to the edge of all I know
> And believing nothing believe in in this:[198]

Then silence. And one that lasted several years for Wiman while he sought to find the right words for just what it was that he believed given his uneasiness with atheism and contemporary

[196] Ibid
[197] Christian Wiman, *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* (Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 61.
[198] *My Bright Abyss,* 3.

Christianity. This opening is followed by a series of *attempts*—which is the etymological root of *essay*—to find fitting words to fill and end this silence.

Wiman's poem "Late Fragment" is perhaps his most articulate expression of the poet's seeking after words—however fragmentary—in the haunting silence that stopped his writing:

> How to say this—
> My silences were not always mine:
> Scrabbled hole and the black beyond;
> Vaporous pond
> As if water wanted out of itself;
> Tip of the sycamore's weird bare reach:
> Some latency in things leading not so much to speech
> As to a halting, haunted art
> Wherein to master was to miss—
> *How to say this, how to say this*…[199]

The "latency" within material things Wiman refers to here suggests an excessiveness of potential meanings within matter that leads both to the attempt at finding right words and the understanding of the limits of every attempt. Mastery of words—and of "these things"—is not the ideal but a misguided wrong turn, and the poet (as all who attend closely to words) is left to confront the endlessly repeated question: *How to say this?* This is not yet making any easy ecological claim, but it is opening up a different posture to the world and our relationship to it.

The inability of language to speak for reality brings us to a central concern in Wiman's poetics and theology, which is the relationship between matter and the God who enchants it. In his Gifford lectures on language and God, theologian Rowan Williams argues that such silences are not meant to "deliver us from the specificity of the world we inhabit but […] oblige an ever-deeper attention to it."[200] Indeed, as "Late Fragment" goes on, Wiman writes with beautiful attention to the "creekbed creases" and "moss-covered rock" of the places he knew intimately

[199] *Every Riven Thing,* 44.
[200] Williams, 164.

and loved in childhood. Wiman's writer's block—all writer's block—is an important indication of the limits of language (and the human self) to *speak for* a reality that always exceeds it. This, and not language's inadequacy to properly represent reality, is what gives language its "unfinished character."[201] Or as Wiman questions in the conclusion of "Late Fragment": "What name is not a horizon?"[202] All names—all words—simply point to the more-ness that is beyond them and in which they participate.

Thus, our language is unable to ever attain the impossible—and arguably misguided—ideal of pure representation. Williams suggests that this contingency of our language, revealed to us through silence, suggests something about the reality in which all our utterances occur. There are clear echoes of Wiman's ideas laid out earlier in *My Bright Abyss* when Williams states:

> If our language is systematically indeterminate, incomplete, embodied, developed through paradox, metaphor and formal structure, and interwoven with a silence that opens up further possibilities of speech, it is a reality which consistently indicates a 'hinterland'; as if it is always following on, or always responding, living in the wake of or in the shadow of intelligible relations whose full scale is still obscure to us.[203]

The ecological insight here is subtle, to be sure, but critical: the vast web of interrelationships and just how—and possibly *why*—they interrelate, ultimately eludes the grasp of any community of speakers. The ecological insight in Wiman's text is that the desire to communicate is a desire to respond to an intelligible and communicative non-human world. But more than this, attending to language should, Wiman points out (and Williams agrees), lead to a humbler posture towards the material reality in which communication is even possible.

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[201] Ibid, 168.
[202] *Every Riven Thing,* 44.
[203] Williams*,* 168.

This is not to say that all our language is meaningless. Far from it. It is, however, to suggest that the stance to the world which implies humans will eventually and inevitably understand everything in some conciliar theory complete with static, univocal descriptors for all of it, proceeds from the epistemic hubris of the post-Enlightenment, disenchanted condition. Such a stance fails to see that a "pure language" of univocal meaning is not simply undesirable, it is largely impossible. Robinson and Berry will extend this insight in their own particular work with much clearer ecological implications.

As I argued above, this contingency of vision and language pervades Wiman's writing and we see it in both the first essay of *My Bright Abyss* and the first poem in *Every Riven Thing*. In Wiman's first essay, the penultimate paragraph jumps back in time to one of Wiman's childhood memories of Texas in a sandstorm. He recalls:

> Soon tumbleweeds began to skip and nimble by, a dust devil flickered tirelessly in the vacant lot across the street from our house, and birds began rocketing past with their wings shut as if they'd been flung. Worse than snow, worse than ice, a bad sandstorm shrinks the world to the slit of your eyes, lifting from the fields an inchoate, creaturely mass that claws at any exposed skin as if the dust remembered what it was, which is what you are—alive, alive—and sought to return.[204]

The memory is a remarkable reflection on an encounter with one of the more fleeting "things" in the natural world. The dust whipped up into a storm forms a dust devil, and Wiman, through the slits of his eyes, must rely on his limited, contingent perception to understand it.

[204] *My Bright Abyss,* 13.

If the dust devil is some "thing" in a Heideggerian sense,[205] just what exactly is it outside of its continued movement from chaos to order and back to chaos? The dust devil is held as a unitary object in the imagination—a noun in the English language—but it is really only a process that unfolds in time. A dust devil is more a verb, an action that moves through time. It is only a thing as it moves and changes form. But precisely *what* whipped this into being brings one to a particular edge of language and what can be known with certainty. And trying to articulate this, that is, trying to respond to the question it poses, suggests that there is something communicative and intelligible within the material world that resonates with the human mind and demands response. This is where, for Wiman, poetry plays a critical role: exploring these edges and seeking to find the fitting words. It is also what becomes the grounds for a secular experience of a re-enchanted reality.

In *Every Riven Thing*, the opening poem "Dust Devil" is formed out of this particular memory.

"Dust Devil"

mystical hysterical amalgam of earth and wind
and mind

over and of
the much-loved

dust you go
through a field I know

by broken heart
for I have learned this art

[205] In "The Thing," Heidegger talks about the thingness of a jug and how the artist's role is to simply give form to the void, writing "…the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No—he shapes the void. For it, in it, and out of it, he forms the clay into the form. From start to finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as the container in the shape of a containing vessel. The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds." Martin Heidegger, "The Thing" *Poetry, Language, Thought,* Trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971), 167.

of flourishing
vanishing

wherein to live
is to move

cohesion
illusion

wild untouchable toy
called by a boy

God's top
in a time when time stopped[206]

Each couplet of "Dust Devil" alters the rhythm to generate an uneven pace where slow, tripping lines are coupled with more rapid lines. The first couplet is a good instance, but this recurs throughout. Lines like "over and of" (3) and "through a field I know" (6) are coupled with more rapid moving lines, such as "the much-loved" (4) and "dust you go" (5). The pacing and movement of the language, again, mimic the cyclical movement of the dust devil.

But what exactly *is* this dust devil? The poet's observations are as different in form as they are in content from a natural scientist's detached, objective explanation. Indeed, the poet here suggests throughout that whatever this ephemeral *thing* is, a totalizing explanation must remain elusive. As the opening line suggests, this dust devil is something "mystical," eluding human rationality and quite possibly uniting it with a transcendent reality. It is also "*hysterical*," uncontrolled and wild.

Even this poem, this small act of speaking for and about it, is undercut by an admission that the brief life of the dust devil, momentarily coherent and momentarily and partially observed, cannot be adequately contained by human thought or language since its rapid

[206] *Every Riven Thing,* 3 – 4.

"flourishing/vanishing" occurs in a world "wherein to live/ is to move" (9 – 12). This theme of the ever-changing, ever-moving world comes up repeatedly in *Every Riven Thing* and is one of the ways Wiman attempts to defamiliarize how we understand both the natural world and the God who undergirds it. Both God and the material world are, in Wiman's formulation, infinitely complex and both are in a state of perpetual motion that humans are always already caught up in as material creatures.

The poet also recognizes that this dust devil is composed of "earth and wind / and mind." But just *whose* mind remains an open question. It could be the poet's or God's or even the readers'. The poem allows the possibility that it is all three. The line division in this opening couplet, however, moves from a potentially strict materialism and recovers the possibility of a more participatory ontology. That is, it starts to suggest more explicitly an understanding of a re-enchanted world in which humans and all material life that exists participate in the God who is the ongoing source of all Being. If the dust devil is some mysterious amalgam of earth and wind, it is also only understood by being joined with the poet's perception. However, if the mind referred to is God's (a reading which the last stanza of the poem leaves open), the natural world is one marked by God's ongoing attention and presence *in* the world. But the dust devil is not pure nature since it can only ever be rendered to the human through experience and perception and language.

In a more recent work, *He Held Radical Light*, Wiman reflects upon the poetry of Denise Levertov and praises her ability to create "forms that seem to merge the mind and its perceptions, as if a very particular world came to life by means of the gaze that was cast upon it."[207] Going further, Wiman suggests that there is a pervasive interdependence between the world and the

[207] Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2018), 13.

poet's perception, for it is only in "durable poetry [that] a world becomes real as it realized in these particular words."[208] Still reflecting on Levertov, Wiman articulates poignantly the connection between the poet's response to the world and how the desire to express something within formal constraints is nothing other than the acknowledgment that all material reality has a life and an energy and a dynamism that demand response. In order to write poetry "you have to believe that an object or person has some 'essential energy,' first of all, and secondly, that language can share it."[209]

Yet if the ephemeral dust devil is called into being by Wiman's particular *words*, he is only making this real in a derivative mode. His work as poet is a participation into the prior force that called it into being. As such, material reality is also always something radically other than human, and in no way contingent on human perception. The poem opens up the possibility that this dust devil is also something perceived and attended to by God, its ultimate source. Before it exists in relation to man it exists in relation to its Creator. This idea is suggestive of the possibility that the poet's limited attention and vocabulary—however particular and world forming—work within the mind of a God who not only attends to all matter (which is different than inhabiting it, as some animists would claim), but has also addressed it: "wild untouchable toy / *called* by a boy / God's top / in a time when time stopped" (13 -16). These final lines turn the dust devil into one of God's moving and movable playthings he has *called*, echoing the creative proclamations throughout Genesis: "Let there be…" In a subtle allusion to Genesis, Wiman generates an image of God as the boy who set it all spinning and continues to attend to its ongoing movement. Seeing this as God's *toy*—as terrifying and mysterious as it may be—

[208] Ibid
[209] Ibid, 15.

allows the *joy* that was so essential to Wiman's conversion to be understood as a proper response to the world.

This reading sheds some light on the central (albeit subtle) biblical allusions within the poem. The "amalgam of earth and wind" is a faint echo of the creation of the first man, Adam, who is fashioned from the earth's clay and then animated by having the creator God breathe into him. Robert Alter's translation of Genesis 2:7b notes: "then the Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature."[210] The human/humus wordplay is to show that man is part(icipant) of the material world, yet set apart by having the Divine wind-breath-spirit (the Hebrew *ruach*) blown into his nostrils.[211] This theme returns in "Every Riven Thing" in which I will unpack the fuller significance of God's spirit as an abiding "presence" of his ongoing utterance of the Genesis command to "Let there be…" The call into being of something out of nothing—*creatio ex nihilo*—is not a one-time event from an otherwise detached God. As Wiman will suggest in his poetry—building on creation theology that is often ignored—the created order is nothing other than his language and, as such, is vitalized and animated by the ongoing utterance of *ruach*, the breath, wind, spirit of God.

If the dust devil then becomes a microcosm of humankind, and arguably of all living beings who are some "mystical hysterical amalgam" of earth and wind, Wiman ushers his readers towards a vision of a world re-enchanted along particularly Christian lines. Wiman is undertaking—even recovering—a type of symbolic and allegorical reading of the cosmos rendered regressive and obsolete within the strictures of the disenchanted world picture. By attending to the particulars of the dust devil it becomes much more than itself, participating in a

[210] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1997), 8.
[211] Ibid, 3, 8.

larger reality that allows the author to reflect upon his own status as an animated material being with real finite limits, and to explore just what might make such a thing as his improbably existence possible.

The "natural object" that is the dust devil, in fact, becomes Wiman's gateway to an encounter with both the earth *and* with God, not as some infinite and abstract Being outside the world of time and change, but as a God who communicates himself through the material world. This is not, to use Charles Taylor's term for disembodied, post-Enlightenment forms of Christianity, "excarnational" theology.[212] In fact, immediately following his recollection of the dust devil in *My Bright Abyss*, Wiman meditates on how God, whatever He is, makes Himself known *through* material reality. This is the only way in which he can commune—and communicate—with material creatures:

> Lord, I can approach you only by means of my consciousness, but consciousness can only approach you as an object, which you are not. I have no hope of experiencing you as I experience the world—directly, immediately—yet I want nothing more. Indeed, so great is my hunger for you—or is this evidence of your hunger for me?—that I seem to see in you in the black flower mourners make beside a grave I do not know, in the embers' innards like a shining hive, in the bare abundance of a winter tree whose every limb is lit and fraught with snow. Lord, Lord, how bright the abyss inside that "seem."[213]

The tension in the "seem" is that Wiman's contingent vision, his ignorance, must keep the possibility of doubt and unbelief as viable options even as he strives to live by faith. It is precisely the tension that Taylor notes is a hallmark of belief in the secular age. Faith, Wiman

[212] *A Secular Age,* 874.
[213] *My Bright Abyss,* 13.

notes, "must pass through a crucible of doubt."[214] Yet the "seem" is also a playful and slippery homophone of "seam" and Wiman meditates on why the material world seems to reveal the seams through which the re-enchanted reality of God and the source of the world's meaning lies.

Wiman fleshes out the connections between the material world and God much more fully in "One Time," which is a pair of place-oriented poems: "Canyon de Chelly, Arizona" and "2047 Grace Street."

I. Canyon de Chelly, Arizona

> Then I looked down into the lovely cut
> of a missing river, something under
> dusk's upflooding shadows
> claiming for itself a clarity
> of which my eyes were not yet capable:
> fissures could be footpaths, ancient homes
> random erosions; pictographs depicting fealties
> of who knows what hearts, to who knows what god.
> To believe is to believe you have been torn
> from the abyss, yet stand waveringly on its rim.
> I come back to the world. I come back
> to the world and would speak of it plainly,
> with only so much artifice as words
> themselves require, only so much distance
> as my own eyes impose
> on the slickrock whorls of the real
> canyon, the yucca's stricken
> clench, and, on the other side,
> the dozen buzzards swirled and buoyed
> above some terrible intangible fire
> that must scald the very heart
> of matter to cast up such avid ash.[215]

In this first poem of the pair, the poet is once again situated as an observer of a natural scene, surveying a dried-out canyon bed in Arizona. The poem opens with the poet trying to see an

[214] Ibid, 9
[215] *Every Riven Thing,* 27.

absence, “something” invisible: a “missing river.” The speaker admits of being “not yet capable” for any clarity of sight and goes on to explain that this task requires not the certainty of direct vision, but the contingent uncertainty of hermeneutics. Interpretation of this place is required if there is to be any knowledge of the place.

But this proves difficult because the place opens itself up to numerous possibilities. The fissures “could be” almost anything: “footpaths, ancient homes/ random erosions.” The poem then abruptly turns the reader’s attention, indicating that this inescapable human condition—the necessity of interpreting a given reality external to the self—is analogous to belief: “To believe is to believe you have been torn / from the abyss, yet stand waveringly on its rim.” The line division here is key. The pause created between being “torn” and being “torn / from” invites a double meaning of the word that undermines univocity since both work. In the first sense, the individual knows that belief renders one incomplete and, thus, torn. The connotations here are negative. (This idea comes up more explicitly in the poem “Every Riven Thing,” which I will turn to more fully in a moment.) Yet to be “torn / from the abyss” is positive; it is to be pulled back—not rent—and potentially saved from the abyss of meaninglessness and oblivion, the very things that haunts one in the immanent frame. The whole poem turns on these two lines and they provide a link to Wiman’s understanding of why God matters in terms of the interpretive work required to be open to the possibility of a re-enchanted reality.

For Wiman, the world, like a poem, is not dependent upon the interpreter for its construction and, thus, its meaning. The poet (and all participants in the material world) must occupy a position not of pride or certainty, but a wavering and tentative stance between knowing and not knowing, doubt, belief, and knowledge. The abyss, for Wiman, is meaningless—a world

devoid of any purpose and intentionality. However, as Wiman argues in *My Bright Abyss*, it is only *through* this abyss that God can be known.

As Lori Branch notes, this is the distinctly postsecular challenge to post-Enlightenment thought that pits knowledge against belief, certainty against uncertainty, and rather sees the two as a dynamic, interlocked pair. For Wiman, though, God is the "bright abyss" and, as such, the source of meaning and the beginning and end of all the world's movement. This injects a certain purpose into the world, but also shapes the stance of the one who looks upon it. The world—as something expressed of God—can never be something we simply stands over as if we were solely in control, but it must be stood under, or less awkwardly, under-stood.

And as the poet "come[s] back to the world" in the hopes of finding the plain words for this canyon, he is struck again by the "slickrock whorls" that are reality. The paradoxical "slickrock" world is something both seemingly fixed, yet slippery and evasive. It is static and in motion. It is visible in part and largely hidden from sight.

As was noted in "Dust Devil," through this particular encounter with the natural world, the poet is brought into a moment of epiphany and confrontation with a world enchanted by uncontainable, untouchable forces. In the last image, the poet sees a "dozen buzzards swirled and buoyed / above some terrible intangible fire / that must scald the very heart / of matter to cast up such avid ash." Like the rock of the canyon, the buzzards swirl in a cyclical pattern evoking, once again, the earth's ceaseless motion and flux and the invisible wind/spirit that moves, unseen, where it will. This world the poet sees in part is one animated by that "terrible intangible fire" of vitality at the very heart of all matter. But just what this "fire" might be finds more complete expression in the second part of this pairing, "2047 Grace Street."

II. 2047 Grace Street

But the world is more often refuge
than evidence, comfort and covert
for the flinching will, rather than the sharp
particulate instants through which God's being burns
into ours. I say God and mean more
than the bright abyss that opens in that word.
I say world and mean less
than the abstract oblivion of atoms
out of which every intact thing emerges,
into which every intact thing finally goes.
I do not know how to come closer to God
except by standing where a world is ending
for one man. It is still dark,
and for an hour I have listened
to the breathing of the woman I love beyond
my ability to love. Praise to the pain
scalding us toward each other, the grief
beyond which, please God, when will live
and thrive. And praise to the light that is not
yet, the dawn in which one bird believes,
crying not as if there had been no night
but as if there were no night in which it had not been.[216]

The poem, titled with the address of Wiman's first home with his wife, is about the restless struggle to accept a material world in which pain and suffering are the seemingly meaningless facts with which all humans are confronted. This poem begins to make more definite Wiman's distinctly postsecular rendering of Christianity and its attendant myth of re-enchantment.

In the final pages of *My Bright Abyss*, Wiman provides an important clue for interpreting this poem, writing:

> *Grace.* It is—not at all coincidentally, I now think—the name of the street where my wife and I first lived together. It is the middle name of our firstborn child, who with her twin sister has taught us so much about how to accept God's immanent presence. And it is, I

[216] *Every Riven Thing,* 27.

> am absolutely sure, the fearful and hopeful state in which my wife and I lay the first night I was home from the hospital after the transplant, feeling like a holy fever that bright defiance of, not death exactly, and not suffering, but meaningless death and suffering – which surely warrants, if anything does, the name of faith.[217]

Grace, in Wiman's register, fuses together the "immanent presence" of God in his bodily suffering. This is a clear indication of Wiman's project of re-enchantment and opens up a way of reading the poem "2047 Grace Street" along these lines.

The opening conjunction of the poem suggests that it is a continuation of thought with "Canyon de Chelly, Arizona." This conjunction—"But"—makes these poems into two interdependent pieces of one whole. So while the first poem ends rather enigmatically in the poet's confrontation with the "terrible intangible fire" that animates and destroys all matter, "2047 Grace Street" makes a connection between this mysterious force and the God whose "being burns into ours." The poet goes on to express how inadequate the words for God and the world are in this scenario: "I say God and mean more / than the bright abyss that opens in that word. / I say world and mean less / than the abstract oblivion of atoms / out of which every intact thing emerges, / into which every intact thing finally goes." Wiman is acknowledging here, again, the tensions between words and our intended meaning.

The simple sound of *God* has become Wiman's "bright abyss"—echoing the abyss from "Canyon de Chelly, Arizona." As the passage from *My Bright Abyss* indicates, God is not the *negation* of the abyss but is a "bright" abyss, one in which suffering and death still occur, but they are both natural processes that *mean* something. "Death is here to teach us something, or to make us fit for something," Wiman writes, which is an idea he admits "would sound

[217] *My Bright Abyss,* 178.

preposterous to modern scientific sensibilities."[218] That death can give form to life, though, is precisely how (noted above) it is silences that give the form to words.

Faith has "little to do with belief, and so much to do with acceptance. Acceptance of all the gifts that God, even in the midst of death, grants us."[219] Wiman's insight here is echoed by philosopher Norman Wirzba, who maintains that "creaturely life [in contradistinction from autonomous subjectivity] is marked by the humble, grateful reception of life as a gracious gift from God. […] Deathly 'life,' is the existence that disrespects and violates limits, is marked by the obligation to life from out of oneself […]. But this is an impossible, frustrating obligation, and a fundamental self-deception, because no creature is the source of its own life." [220] For Wiman, confronting this bare "fact" is peculiarly difficult in a late modern, secular age that "sought to eliminate death in the frenzy of the instant, to deflect it with irony and hard-edged surfaces in which because nothing was valued more than anything else, nothing was subject to ultimate confirmation or denial."[221] What is needed, Wiman urges, is "to begin finding a way to once more imagine ourselves into and out of death."[222] Wiman's stare down with death is, ultimately, an acceptance of the givenness of life even in the raging against the uncertainty that shrouds its ineluctable end.

If death is here to give shape to life, as Wiman claims, that shape is one of radical humility. This is the fundamental starting point, we will see in the fourth chapter, for Wendell Berry's agrarian vision. As the Genesis narrative indicates, humans were made from soil, from humus, and to humus they will return. And in "2047 Grace Street," Wiman indicates this new

[218] Ibid, 105.
[219] *My Bright Abyss,* 178.
[220] Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving our World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 109.
[221] *My Bright Abyss,* 150.
[222] Ibid

posture: "… praise to the light that is not / yet, the dawn in which one bird believes, / crying not as if there had been no night / but as if there were no night in which it had not been." This is not to ignore or suppress the dark night of death which couches human life, but rather to be chastened and formed by it.

An openness to such belief is not to negate the limits of our vision in the dark—a subtle allusion here to Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: "For now we see in a mirror dimly"—but it is to come again to the fact of being. The fact that through no machinations or willing of humans: humans are. In a world where all things have been given in integrative way—life, death, joy, pain, sorrow, longing, suffering, bodies, families, friends—the fundamental posture is one of gratitude, praise, and, finally, wonder. The ideas of seeing dimly "through a glass" finds the best articulation in "From a Window" which is another of Wiman's poems in *Every Riven Thing* that grapples with death, suffering, and the limits of human vision.[223]

"From a Window"

Incurable and unbelieving
In any truth but the truth of grieving,

I saw a tree inside a tree
Rise kaleidoscopically

As if the leaves had livelier ghosts.
I pressed my face as close

To the pane as I could get
To watch that fitful, fluent spirit

That seemed a single being undefined
Or countless beings of one mind

Haul its strange cohesion

[223] I owe much of my reading of this poem to a conference paper titled "Forms of Contingent Faith: The Necessity of Doubt in Christian Wiman's Poetry," delivered by Dr. Chad Wriglesworth for the *Christianity and Literature Study Group* as part of the ACCUTE conference held at the University of Ottawa in the Spring of 2015.

Beyond the limits of my vision

Over the house heavenwards.
Of course I knew those leaves were birds

Of course that old tree stood
Exactly as it had and would

(but why should it seem fuller now?)
And though a man's mind might endow

Even a tree with some excess
Of life to which a man seems witness,

That life is not the life of men.
And that is where the joy came in.

This entire poem revolves around the paradox that joy can infuse a material world of suffering and pain. Once again Wiman sets up the speaker of the poem as one surveying a scene, but this time the external world is mediated through a pane of glass. The homophonic wordplay with *pane* suggests that the speaker's vision is also mediated through the *pain* and suffering of an incurable disease. It is this state of being—a state of being towards death—that controls the poem from the outset.

We begin in the mind of the speaker. Wriglesworth notes that "[w]e enter the poem without reference to a person or another created form, but only an all-consuming state of subjectivity."[224] Yet the opening couplet is not final, it is not closed off by a period but left open with a comma. The poet then sees through the window a murmuration of birds take flight from a tree: "I saw a tree inside a tree / rise kaleidoscopically." Wriglesworth points out that "[t]he 'tree inside a tree' opens up a new creation of vitality—life nested within life—so that the poet bent on wordplay, who once "saw" only a materialist way of being, has encountered a vivacious

[224] Chad Wriglesworth, Conference Paper for the Christianity and Literature Study Group. ACCUTE. 2015, 7.

reality that is now beginning to *saw* the previous way of knowing "mere matter" to the ground.[225] (Of course, "mere matter" is noted tongue-in-cheek, for to reductively label something infinitely meaningful as "mere" is an absurdity.) "Pause for a moment," Rowan Williams writes, " to reflect on how odd it is that our language can discover anything by simply playing games with itself."[226] Wiman is here recognizing that poetry—with its multiplicity of meanings and its ambiguities— is not merely some aberration of human speech but it is precisely the type of thing we might expect if the material world is itself the "fluent" speech of a creative God. Poetry then is an intimate participation in both the world and God and has the possibility to draw one into a nearer union with both.

Echoing the ideas in "Dust Devil" and "Canyon de Chelly, Arizona," Wiman is once again fascinated by a world that is enchanted by some spiritual presence that animates the world. In the case of this poem it is found in the "livelier ghosts" that set the birds into flight. He leans close to the pane "to watch that fitful, fluent spirit / that seemed a single being undefined / or countless beings of one mind / haul its strange cohesion / beyond the limits of my vision / over the house heavenwards." Contrary to the disenchanted stance of control, Wiman again observes the limitations of human perception and how this leaves open the possibility of some transcendent reality that animates the immanent world.

The poet, though, is certain about none of this. The metaphorical language—"as if" and "seemed"—allow the poet to undercut these speculations with a rather dismissive: "Of course I knew those leaves were birds. / Of course that old tree stood / exactly as it had and would." The line, though, is abruptly stopped and left open ended with no punctuation mark. The diseased speaker understands that the cause of the birds' movement remains unknown and the life of the

[225] Ibid, 8.
[226] Williams, 135.

tree will go on as it had "and would" long after the poet is dead. But before the poet entertains this thought, he goes back to ruminations on this tree: "(but why should it seem fuller now?)." And the real struggle with words and knowledge is how to make sense of a world that always *seems* to be something else, a world that is always in a process of ceaseless exchange and movement, much like the language we use for it.

As the poem concludes, there is a movement from pure subjectivity towards a meditation on the world outside the self. Although this world of non-human things is apprehended by the poet only partially, it is in the very fact of its otherness that brings joy to the poet: "and though a man's mind might endow / even a tree with some excess / of life to which a man seems witness, / that life is not the life of men. / And that is where the joy came in." The movement from despair to joy occurs when the poet does not yield everything to pure subjectivity and construction, nor does he find an inherent meaninglessness in the powers of his imagination to make the world sensible. Rather, the "joy" comes in upon the realization that his limited vision bears witness to a meaningful world of which he is a meaningful participant. This joy is again fundamental to Wiman's conversion to a new myth of reality. "The inclusion and entrance of joy," Wriglesworth notes, "suggests the arrival of a wholly other expression of life—perhaps indicative of the Greek word *zoe*—life from beyond life that creates: Word within word, world within world, tree within tree—that source of all things that dwells among the *bios* of creaturely forms as a divine gift."[227]

Wiman's poetry and prose suggest that there are strains of postsecular Christian theology that figure the world as sacred because it is first a gift from a creator God and exists in relation to this source of Being before it exists in relation to human knowledge or control.

[227] Ibid, 11.

Obviously, that's a contestable claim in the secular age. Yet this is precisely the Christian form of re-enchantment on offer in Wiman's poetry. We find this particularly Christian form of re-enchantment poignantly expressed in the title poem of *Every Riven Thing.* In many ways, the poem is the culmination of Wiman's reflection on the interrelationship between human joy, suffering, and language, and the God in whom all things might be joined together. The poem is an extended meditation, and intensification, of several of the ideas already touched upon in other poems and essays.

"Every Riven Thing" is composed of four stanzas of five lines and then a final stanza of the one, repeated line that opens each stanza: "God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made." The poem's power lies in how Wiman places a certain pressure on these words, not only through their repetition, but in situating them within different contexts and grammatical structures so that the meaning of each word slides and shifts through each new rendering in each verse. The words oddly become familiar through multiple readings but are always strange in their new delivery and altered context. This is not, as I will show, to play a poststructural game in which all these terms are rendered meaningless; rather, the verses work together to form a coherent, gathered meaning and contingent resolution.

The poem opens:

> God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
> Sing his being simply by being
> The thing it is:
> Stone and tree and sky,
> Man who sees and sings and wonders why
>
> God goes. [l. 1 – 6][228]

[228] *Every Riven Thing,* 24.

The first stanza is marked by the presence of a God who is actively moving within the "riven things" to which he *belongs*. God is not simply the supreme and detached being outside some encapsulated world. In a way, Wiman's focus upon a God who "goes" and who "belongs" to the created world is a reformulation of the late Medieval and early modern theological renderings of God and the world–the relationship between transcendence and immanence—that created the very conditions in which the myth of disenchantment became possible. If Lynn White Jr. challenged his audience to *rethink* the old religion (by which he meant Christianity), this is precisely what Wiman's poem is doing. God is not, Wiman is showing, a noun, but something closer to a verb. God is movement and act, not a static object. As Wiman notes in *My Bright Abyss*: "Any notion of God that is static is—since it asserts singular knowledge of God and seeks to limit his being to that knowledge—blasphemous."[229] The poem uses language that goes out from the poet and, thus, continues belonging to him or her, even as the poem has freedom as it moves in the world.

This is, again, to counteract certain strains of objectivist theology borne in modernity wherein God was figured as a transcendent Being untethered from an autonomous natural order. It is in this mode that modern theology asserted concepts about God's character that were logical corollaries of a supreme being, yet also so abstract that God's omnipotent, omniscient character seemed remote from embodied, creaturely life. Such abstractions helped give rise to a disenchanted form of excarnational Christianity, as Charles Taylor's work shows. Once God is imagined in some logically ideal fashion, his ongoing participation in the phenomenal world is much easier to imagine away. Countering this theology, Wiman urges Christians particularly—

[229] Ibid, 61.

and secular readers more broadly—to accept the possibility of a Christ who is not the product of rationalism, but *contingent* in the moment-to-moment reality of creaturely life:

> Omnipotent, eternal, omniscient—what in the world do these rotten words really mean? Are we able to imagine such attributes, much less perceive them? I don't think so. Christ is the only way toward knowledge of God, and Christ is contingency. […] Better to say that contingency is the only way toward knowledge of God, and contingency, for Christians, is the essence of incarnation. And incarnation, as well as the possibilities for salvation within it, precedes Christ's presence in history, and exceeds all that is known by the term Christianity.[230]

These lines echo earlier thoughts found in "Notes on Poetry and Religion," wherein Wiman makes the point that an "abstract" God who is merely an idea free from the change and decay of this world is impossible to respond with hope or joy or love. According to Wiman, God must belong to this world, he must enchant it, he must be part of the immanent frame since "You cannot devote your life to an abstraction. Indeed, life shatters all abstractions in one way or another, including words such as *faith or belief*. If God is not *in the very fabric of existence* for you, if you do not find Him (or miss Him!) in the details of your daily life, then religion is just one more way to commit spiritual suicide."[231]

If, according to Wiman, God as the source of Being is not detached from the world but intimately involved in it, continuing to uphold and sustain it, then one has a workable frame for the contingency and dependence of *all* creaturely, material life. Indeed, this is *why* all things are, for Wiman, "riven." *Riven* is an uncommon word, but it is the past participle of "to rive" which

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[230] *My Bright, Abyss,* 18.

[231] Christian Wiman. "Notes on Poetry and Religion." *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 165.

means to crack or tear apart. If all things subsist because of the ongoing sustaining attention of the source of Being, then should this attention depart, all reality would cease to *be*.[232] This is not just a theological point, but it is fundamentally an ecological point. If all things are riven, then all things depend on other things for their completion and fulfillment. The whole web of material reality is an interlocking weave. All things exist in complex relationships, not only to the unseen source of Being but to one another. Wiman makes no explicit ecological claims, but this is, again, foundational for what Robinson and Berry will explore in their more pronounced ecological projects.

In the very way Wiman uses language he indicates that this ecological truth permeates our language. No word or phoneme is autonomous in its meaning; rather, the meaning is always a function of its relationship to its location with other words and phonemes. A past participle like *riven*, wherein a verb becomes an adjective or noun, depends upon the same contingency of meaning that the entire poem performs. A "thing" (a noun) might only be a thing in one context, but within another context it becomes an "action" (a verb) or a qualifier (an adjective). Context makes all the difference, and thus meaning in this poem—in a contingent world—is something always on the move. This is not to negate the presence of meaning, but it is, perhaps, to understand meaning as something (to borrow lines from T.S. Eliot) "still and still moving."[233]

Furthermore, if everything is riven, everything is at once fundamentally broken and fundamentally incomplete *in itself.* The double meaning here holds. Nothing is autonomous and nothing in a state of perfection in a fallen world. All things in the material world are split and

[232] This is actually an insight in Calvin and numerous other theologians going back to Augustine. For instance, see Book 1, Ch.5 on the "continual governance" of the Creation in John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* Trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 50 – 63.

[233] T.S. Eliot, "East Coker*" Four Quartets. The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 183.

cracked; that is, they are contingent and ultimately dependent upon other things outside and beyond themselves in order to continue being and existing and perpetuating. For Wiman, this movement is underwritten and orchestrated by the attention of a God whose disposition towards all of this is one of enduring love. It is for this reason, the poet suggests, that "God goes" and all things "sing his [God's] being simply by being." The "stone" and "tree" and "sky" simply are the things they are and while man's contingent vision leads him to "wonder why" such things are, the givenness of their being depends on nothing from human perception and, ultimately, remains a mystery.

The three objects are also indicative of different realms of being. The stone appears to be inert matter, there is no discernible vitality in it to perpetuate itself through procreation. It simply is. A tree, however, lives and dies, and is participant in the change and decay of material existence. It also bears seeds and new trees are created and carry forward in time. The sky, however, is not so clearly a definable "thing" but a seemingly invisible substance that is present in the perception of man. It is the substance made of subsensible material through which all other matter moves and is experienced.

In a landmark work of eco-phenomenology, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram provides an insightful account of experiencing the sky that helps unpack some of the riches in Wiman's poem. Abram notes the significance of the sky which houses the invisible air:

> [T]he air can never be opened for our eyes, never made manifest. Itself invisible, it is the medium through which we see all else in the present terrain. And this unseen enigma is the very mystery that enables life to live. It unites our breathing bodies not only with the under-the-ground (with the rich microbial life of the soil, with fossil and mineral deposits deep in the bedrock), and not only with the beyond-the-horizon (with distant forests and

> oceans), but also with the interior life of all that we perceive in the open field of the living present. […] What the plants are quietly breathing out, we animals are breathing in; what we breath out, the plants are breathing in. The air, we might say, is the soul of the visible landscape, the secret realm from when all beings drawn their nourishment.[234]

From rock to tree to sky, Wiman's poetry, like Abram's phenomenology, attempts to show the interconnected, ecological relationships of all life that depend upon and participate with one another.

In the second stanza, the shifting punctuation turns attention from God towards humanity.

> God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
> means a storm of peace.
> Think of the atoms inside the stone.
> Think of the man who sits alone
> trying to will himself into a stillness where
>
> God goes belonging.

Just who the verbal "Belonging" belongs to, however, is ambiguous. It makes sense in the context of the previous stanza, that the implied subject is "man." As such, it is man who belongs to the riven things of his making. This leads to the paradoxical "storm of peace." Wiman may very well be talking here of the making of poetry, which involves both control and the relinquishing of control, the attempt to speak intentionally, but also a "bodying forth" of meanings that will ultimately escape authorial intention. There is both chaos and form in the creation of culture, and man as maker participates in this tension through the material act of *creatio ex creatis*.

However, the remainder of the second stanza also indicates that the verbal is also quite possibly in relation to God. And the paradoxical "storm of peace" is a fitting analogy to the

[234] Abram, 226.

motion and stasis that characterize the material objects that subsist by the Creator's ongoing attention. Returning to the "stone" in the first stanza, Wiman commands with an imperative sentence: "Think of the atoms inside the stone." The reader must imagine the subsensible reality of perpetual movement voice and movement that underwrites everything, even an object as seeming static as a stone. Limited human perception renders it a fixed object, a whole. Yet beneath the appearances is an ongoing, frenetic activity of atomic structures. Wiman then says, again with the imperative: "Think of the man who sits alone / trying to will himself into a stillness where / God goes belonging." And again, the paradox Wiman brings to mind is the unique position humans occupy in the realm of material objects. They share and participate in the atomic frenzy at work in stones, trees, and even the sky, yet they also possess the will to find the silence and stillness in which they might apprehend God.

In the third and fourth and final partial stanza, Wiman brings to a climax his reflection on the interconnectedness of words, the world, and God.

> God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made
> there is given one shade
> shaped exactly to the thing itself:
> under the tree a darker tree;
> under the man the only man to see
>
> God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made
> the things that bring near,
> made the mind that makes him go.
> A part of what man knows,
> apart from what man knows,
>
> God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.

The intriguing aspect of the third stanza is that while the attention now focuses upon the tree and the man and their shadows, light is never mentioned. It's the unspoken source from which all sight is made possible, even the sight of the "negative" form of shade that follows all things. In a

collection that repeatedly calls into question the powers of human vision, Wiman's point seems to be that even the powers of human vision wherein we distinguish objects from each other is all contingent on the ever moving rays of light that move through the invisible sky, reflect off of objects and meet the perceiving eye.

In the penultimate stanza, Wiman shifts the focus to the idea that the world is *made*. The world is a *given* creation, made by a God who moves through it continuously. When God uttered "Let there be…" in Genesis, that may not be a one-time declaration that has ended, as Christians often assume with what is a default, functional deism. Rather, as David Abram suggests after looking at the Jewish mystical tradition: "It is by virtue of [God's] *continual* breath that nature is always new; the world around is a continual, ongoing utterance."[235] Again, this is an important feature of a postsecular Christian theology that speaks to the Anthropocene, one that recovers fresh ways of understanding the world from within a tradition that it has forgotten or ignored. If God's ongoing utterance of the world is true, then these "things" are not the *res extensa* of matter, untethered from a deistic God. Instead, they are the very things by which he makes Himself known to a human's limited, material mind.

The mind—the seat of human experience, consciousness, and language—is, as I will explore fully in the following chapter, framed by Marilynne Robinson as the soul. She is attempting to recover older language of *nous* or *psyche*, in which mind and soul were coterminous. Now Wiman does not make this same linguistic move; however, his reflections on the soul in *My Bright Abyss,* I argue, help to understand this section of "Every Riven Thing." Wiman writes:

[235] Abram, 248. For more on this, Abram references the work of Adin Steinsaltz*, The Sustaining Utterance*, trans. Yeuda Haegbi (London: Jason Aronson, 1974).

> …the soul is not simply the agent that does the seeing (the entity to which metaphorical glimmerings are given), it is in some way the things that are seen (the world that glimmers); or perhaps more accurately, the soul is the verb that makes an exchange between the self and reality—or the self and other selves—possible. It is the soul that turns perception into communication, and communication—even if it's just between one man and the storm of atoms around him—into communion.[236]

If this is what Wiman means by "mind"—and the echoes in this passage and the poem "Every Riven Thing" suggest it very well may be—then the mysterious powers of the human mind is how we make sense of our communication, the root of which is *communio*. It is the words as expressions of our mind made from impressions of the world that join us with it and with other language animals.

This is how we participate in material reality yet also participate in the God from which all material reality is given and sustained. Wiman, again, is quick to acknowledge that we cannot know this in the same way we know things through science and empirical observation, but we can know it through a belief open to doubt and humbled by the provisional quality of its claims. And it is such belief, or faith, that is a form of knowledge that is of an entirely different order than that of the empiricism and rationalism privileged in a disenchanted age.

The notion that our language is a response to the natural world may also suggest a certain mechanistic framing: as if our words were some mere *reaction* to a communicative reality that precedes (and proceeds) us. Rather, what I want to stress, along the lines laid out by Taylor and Williams, is that language—particularly poetic language—reveals to us something about what the world is and the way we belong to the world as language animals. Language is the

[236] *My Bright Abyss,* 93.

lebenswelt, or the form of life, by which humans inhabit the earth. The theological insights of Wiman not only provide a viable, if only always tentative, framework for the linguistic dimension of re-enchantment, but also provide a much more satisfactory motivation for seeing material reality as sacred, meaning as given, and our posture towards the earth as one capable of humble wonder instead of detached control.

But to understand expansive experience and understanding of the world wrought through belief, we must look more closely at the soul and, thus, turn to Marilynne Robinson who, interestingly enough, is one of "the three living novelists whose work means the most"[237] to Christian Wiman. In fact, he is particularly intrigued by Robinson because she has done much to recover the language of belief in a secular, disenchanted age. Wiman writes:

> Does the decay of belief among educated people in the West precede the decay of language used to define and explore belief, or do we find the fire of belief fading in us only because the words are sodden with overuse and imprecision, and will not burn? We need *a poetics of belief*, a language capacious enough to include a mystery that, ultimately, defeats it, and sufficiently intimate and inclusive to serve not only as individual expression, but as communal need.[238]

Of course, Wiman's work is a prime example of the "poetics of belief" in the secular age, but his indication that the work of Robinson may be just the visionary light American—and by extension, Western—culture needs, bears further attention. Particularly because Robinson, by attending closely to the human soul and offering a particularly Christian myth of re-enchantment, helps us move closer towards a conception of a truly ecological self, one that is not buffered from the world, but porous and open to becoming re-embedded to it. And the way she arrives

[237] *My Bright Abyss,* 51.
[238] Ibid., 124.

there is, like Wiman, by recovering a lost (or forgotten) language of belief that occupies a precariously liminal space between disenchanted materialism and world-renouncing forms of Christianity.

CHAPTER THREE: MARILYNNE ROBINSON

A Soul of and for the World

In the context of the highly polarized US Presidential election of 2016, Baylor University professor Alan Jacobs wrote a piece in *Harper's* titled "The Watchmen" in which Jacobs asks where all the Christian public intellectuals went.[239] "Half a century ago," he maintains, "such figures existed in America: serious Christian intellectuals who occupied a prominent place on the national stage. They are gone now."[240] In his conclusion, Jacobs laments this situation and then argues that this problem, as he thinks it to be, is not simply due to a dearth of Christian voices, but also a "secular"[241] intellectual audience that is no longer in tune with Christianity: "[F]rom the Fifties to the Seventies, American intellectuals as a group lost the ability to hear the music of religious thought and practice," Jacobs argues, "And surely that happened at least in part because we Christian intellectuals ceased to play it for them."[242]

While culturally provocative, Jacobs' argument does not account for the fact that one of the most recognized and awarded public intellectuals in American culture is Marilynne Robinson, someone who explicitly confesses to be a Christian. Jacobs addresses the case of Robinson, but only to dismiss her particular version of Christianity as being compromised by secularism and, thus, inadequate for his conception of what it means to be a truly *Christian* public intellectual. He argues that while Robinson might be the friend of Barack Obama—a clear indicator of her public influence—she never "calls upon her readers to act differently, socially or

[239]There is a certain irony, I should point out, that Jacobs, a Christian public intellectual, had the platform of *Harper's* with which to make these observations.

[240] Alan Jacobs, "The Watchmen" *Harper's*, September 2016, https://harpers.org/archive/2016/09/the-watchmen/

[241] Ibid

[242] Ibid

politically or morally, than they would normally be inclined to act."[243] Jacobs clarifies that by "her readers" he means Robinson's "largely secular audience."[244] Robinson, it would seem to Jacobs, is *too secular* to be understood as a Christian public intellectual.

Jacobs' take on Robinson's popularity and Christianity is, of course, contestable. I draw attention to it only because it shows a certain reading of Robinson that might surprise secular materialists who are just as nonplussed by Robinson's popularity given her overt attempts to recover Christian thought –particularly Calvinist and Puritan strains of it—in contemporary American intellectual and cultural life. This confusion of how to engage Robinson's thought—which is also the case with Wiman and, as we will see in the next chapter, Wendell Berry—is a feature of reading postsecular American writing by confessional Christians who are not simply in opposition to, but also informed by secularism. Robinson's writing is self-consciously Christian, yet she remains amenable to various aspects of secularism even as she is uncomfortable with certain expressions of contemporary American Christianity. And, as Jacobs' argument indicates, various American Christians continue to be uncomfortable with her today.

The discomfort, I argue, is due in large part to different understandings of secularism, a topic explored in the previous chapters. Part of the challenge is that when Jacobs pits the categories of "secular" against "Christian," there is an underlying assumption that secularism constitutes what Charles Taylor calls a "subtraction narrative"[245] in which secularization necessitates a loss or negation of religious belief. From this frame of reference, Jacobs expects that American Christian intellectuals should continue to be the apologists of the early to mid-

[243] Ibid
[244] Ibid
[245] See Chapter One (p. 42) for more on subtraction narratives.

twentieth century. Indeed, Jacobs offers C.S. Lewis and Reinhold Niebuhr as two possible exemplars of what Christian intellectuals should aspire towards.

Yet to make such an argument fails to understand how Robinson's postsecular theological vision operates. I argue that Robinson is best understood as a postsecular writer who complicates the binary categories of Christian and non-Christian, sacred and secular, belief and doubt, and even religious and scientific. What often unsettles readers prone to accepting such conflict narratives is Robinson's "posture of openness and reception."[246] This posture is not to suggest Robinson is relativistic or, along the lines of other postsecular writers, such as many of the authors John McClure looks at in *Partial Faiths*—writers like N. Scott Momaday, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon, to name a few. Such writers often form hybridized "new" religions out of the fragments of old religions. These new forms of religious expression are created in reaction to (and often against) the most rigid strains of anti-religious, disenchanted secularism.

Yet McClure also argues that the "weakening" of fundamentalisms—whether that's the secular fundamentalism of scientism or dogmatic religious fundamentalism—is a central feature of postsecular narratives that also "affirm the urgent need for a turn toward the religious even as they reject the familiar dream of a full return to an authoritative faith. The paths they chart do not lead back into the domain of conventional religious dwelling […]. Instead they lead into zones where characters must learn to reconcile important secular *and* religious intuitions."[247] For Robinson, I will show, the shared ground of these intuitions is phenomenological. Indeed, her postsecular Christian project is fundamentally about recovering the importance of human

[246] Tae Sung, "'In the Way of the Gift': The Postsecular Conditions of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Humanities* 9.32 (2020): 2

[247] McClure, 6.

experience as a way to make sense of reality and, more to the point of this project, to understand how religious belief inform experience of reality. In this liminal space, one that refuses "simplistic narratives that religion must be either secularized or recovered,"[248] Robinson remains confessionally Christian, working, as Amy Hungerford notes about other confessionally religious writers in contemporary American literature, "within a religious paradigm [she] does not aspire to escape and whose terms [she] does not wish to cast aside."[249] Understanding Robinson's project as postsecular and Christian sheds important light on her fascination of the relationship between human experience, religious belief, and the human relationship to the material world.

In this chapter, I will look more closely at how Robinson occupies the liminal space of the postsecular, by exploring the soul as the site of human *experience*. Yet while Robinson's critique of disenchantment is phenomenological, I will also show in this chapter how it remains confessionally Christian and, finally, deeply concerned about our ecological relationship to the material world. The vision of re-enchantment Robinson offers, I maintain, must be understood in the context of how the individual might experience the world not as some inert and dead material they can quantify and control. Robinson's writing offers no strong apologetic or even argument about why such stories are wrong. Rather, she consistently counters such narratives by bringing us intimately into the experience of reality through other stories. That is, through the experience of other souls. In *Gilead*, Robinson fleshes out a counter narrative of re-enchantment by providing an intimate glimpse into the reality of a person who lives "as if" the material world were sustained and made anew each moment by God, a creative source of energy that is also personal and characterized, above all, by love. For John Ames, the material world is no disenchanted place, but, drawing on John Calvin's theology, is the theatre of God. This

[248] Sung, 2.
[249] Hungerford, 111 – 112.

perception changes his entire posture to himself, to others, and to the material world. Robinson is not strongly dogmatic about this. Rather, her fiction invites readers into a new way of experiencing reality through a new story, one informed by, among other things, Christian belief.

In this chapter I will draw on numerous essays from Robinson; however, her collection of essays in *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (2010) provide her most sustained treatment of the soul from a postsecular Christian perspective. Therefore, I will be looking most closely at this collection, because, I argue, it situates Robinson's project as one particularly concerned with a re-enchanted vision that reimagines the relationship of humans with the material world. Robinson, as some recent scholars are beginning to address, is indeed a writer with an important, albeit understated, ecological vision.[250] My intent, in this chapter, is to show that this ecological vision is underwritten by a postsecular project. And just as Wiman's prose form shed light upon his poetic project, in a similar fashion Robinson's essays provide some hermeneutical tools for understanding her fiction.

After looking at her recovery of the soul and the challenges she poses to otherworldly renditions of Christianity and deterministic materialisms, I will look more closely at Robinson's 2004 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead,* which among other things is Robinson's exploration of a soul who, over the course of a life, learns how to perceive the sacred beauty of the natural world which is not merely the arena for the absurdity that is human existence, but rather, in Robinson's rendering, God's theater. I will focus particularly on the journey the young pastor Ames and his father make to the site of their deceased forebear, which is both a site of their

[250] For instance: George B. Handley, "Religion, Literature, and the Environment in the Work of Marilynne Robinson," *This Life, This World: New Essays on Marilynne Robinson's* Housekeeping, Gilead, *and* Home. Ed. Jason Stevens (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2016): 59 – 90.

familial, ontological source and also a site that demarcates the end of material life. The meaning of this experience, for Ames, unfolds over the course of life, drawing him into deeper and more profound mysteries about who he is and where he is in the world. During this journey, the young Ames experiences a moment of epiphany in which he sees the light of the sun reflected by the light of the moon. This moment (which mirrors the epiphany Robinson experienced in reading the Congregationalist pastor Jonathan Edwards) provides a climactic moment in Ames's narrative in which, I maintain, Robinson presents a re-enchanted vision the world as God's stage. This has significant ecological implications. Indeed, as Belden Lane notes, "The image of the theatre […] suggests how such a theology could (and should) be lived out in a practice of piety that embraces the whole of creation."[251]

A Postsecular Christian Vision

It is worth noting that Robinson actually responded to Jacobs' article "The Watchmen" with her own short letter to the editor of *Harper's,* writing: "There are a great many things those of us who call ourselves Christians need to talk over. One very important one is secularism."[252] She goes on to debunk the well-worn narrative that "this phenomenon [of secularism]" only entails hostility and persecution for Christians and other religious practitioners. She suggests that secularism in the American Academy, for instance, has also been a significant accomplishment, making possible a public space in which "a culture of mutual courtesy and service that is no less compatible with Christianity because it accommodates the same values in other faiths and ethical

[251] Lane, 2.

[252] Marilynne Robinson, "Acts of Faith," Letter to the Editor, *Harper's,* November 2016, 2020: https://harpers.org/archive/2016/11/letters-851/ (Ironically, both she and Jacobs are after a more humane, less polarized American discourse.)

systems."[253] This understanding of secularism echoes Charles Taylor's, particularly the secular$_3$ as a space in which various renderings of reality remain open to one another, allowing a certain "cross-pressure"—to use Taylor's term--from competing narratives to shape one another.

In the best conditions of secularism, scientific and religious discourses confront, challenge, and *mutually inform* one another. These spaces become dangerous and hostile, Taylor would maintain (and Robinson would agree), if and when the narratives—the myths—become "closed spins" rather than "open takes."[254] Such hardened ideology also fails to allow the importance of lived experience, casting it aside for more rigid propositions about what reality is (or should be). For Robinson, experience of reality is always more complex and excessive than the forms of meaning which humans make of it. Yet affording such propositional statements—whether they are creeds or scientific dogmas—the belief that a person is fully able to define and speak for reality is when fundamentalisms emerge, and polarized tribalism ensues. A different path forward in American thought and culture, Robinson repeatedly illustrates in her work, is through the cultivation of a posture of openness—a posture that Robinson maintains should be both religious *and* scientific, since both forms of knowledge demand that we confront and challenge "our comfortable certainties."[255]

This is not to suggest that any and all claims are valid. Robinson is not advocating for an unlimited openness or unchecked relativism. Rather, Robinson's openness begins with valuing subjective experiences in ways that undermine the so-called objectivist stances of closed religious dogmatisms and closed scienti*stic* fundamentalism. Both of these, as I argued in the

[253] Ibid

[254] As noted in Chapter One, a "closed spin" is a tacit understanding of the world that is so engrained as a lived mythology as to be believed to be beyond question and the way things are; an "open take" on the other hand is to realize that one's guiding narrative for life is always contestable and subject to revision.

[255] Marilynne Robinson, "Theology," *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Picador, 2016), 211.

opening chapter, are post-Enlightenment projects that postsecularism challenges. Tae Sung helpfully notes that Robinson's "hermeneutical posture of openness" leads her towards a project that makes no defense for her beliefs, but rather demands an awareness of the *conditions* in which belief and unbelief even take place. The echoes of Taylor's central interest in *A Secular Age* are clear. These conditions, Sung goes on, "open or close moral sources" in the secular age.[256] In other words, Robinson's fiction and prose create imaginative visions in which her particularly Christian narrative of re-enchantment might seem plausible (if not even desirable).

Robinson's writing has proven very difficult for literary critics to contend with, for her thought is not easy to contain or categorize. Alex Engebretson sums up this difficulty succinctly:

> [S]he is a woman critical of feminist scholarship; a political progressive and cultural traditionalist; a liberal Protestant who admires John Calvin; an environmentalist who was sued by Greenpeace; a celebrated novelist who has published more essays than fiction; a domestic novelist and novelist of ideas; a critic of modernism and a champion of the American nineteenth century.[257]

Each set of descriptors illustrates Robinson's liminal position in, out of, and between various intellectual and religious communities. But Engebretson is incorrect when he suggests that this position is due to Robinson's contrarian nature and idiosyncratic form of thought. Rather, I argue the real difficulty in categorizing Robinson is primarily due to her self-consciously cultivated posture towards forms of thought that undermine the primacy of personal experience. The two particular groups are reductive materialists beholden to a myth of disenchantment and religious fundamentalists with heavily dogmatic, otherworldly tendencies. Robinson's writing challenges

[256] Sung, 4.

[257] Alex Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson.* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 2.

both groups in ways that at once attracts and repels them. In her life and in her work, Robinson has cultivated a posture that is deeply critical of the intellectual and cultural pressures to conform. She is, therefore, a writer radically open to the claims of divergent forms of thought—religious, scientific, or otherwise—particularly if they are not enclosed to the claims of human experience.

Robinson's biography—her own life experience—is a helpful entryway into understanding the apparent ease with which she inhabits various intellectual communities while also unsettling established lines of intellectual and cultural affiliation.[258] Robinson notes that she "did not have an especially strong religious upbringing" and actually "came to theology on [her] own."[259] Now despite this apparent lack of theology, Robinson remarks that the "atmosphere [of her childhood] was in fact Calvinist"[260] and it seems, from a story Robinson tells often in essays and interviews, that her appreciation for Calvinist Christian thought only deepened while she attended Pembroke College. It was while reading the great American theologian Jonathan Edwards that Robinson had an epiphany that profoundly influenced her vision of reality, the way she understood God, the world, and herself:

> When I was a sophomore in college, taking a course in American philosophy I went to the library and read an assigned text, Jonathan Edwards's *Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*. There is a long footnote in this daunting treatise that discusses the light of the moon, and how the apparent continuity of the moon's light is a consequence of it reflecting light that is in fact continuously renewed. This was Edwards's analogy for the continuous renewal of the world by the will of God, which creates, to our eyes, seeming

[258] Bits of Robinson's biography are scattered among her essays, but most of it is traced in *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2012).

[259] "Interview with Stevens," 261.

[260] Ibid

> lawfulness and identity, but which is in fact a continuous free act of God. Edwards's footnote was my first, best introduction to epistemology and ontology, and my escape—and what a rescue it was—from the contending, tedious determinisms that seemed to be all that was on offer to me then.[261]

This moment, I maintain, is crucial for understanding Robinson's particularly Christian narrative, or myth, of re-enchantment. I will return to it when it reappears in a poignant episode of *Gilead* and its connection to the Calvinist notion of the world as God's theatre. At this point, however, it is simply worth noting that for Robinson, Edwards's meditations on the material world are what initially prompted her "religious belief in intellectual openness."[262] Edwards, a Congregationalist preacher from the 18th century, satisfied her intellectual hunger for a more satisfactory story about the world than the various reductionisms of modern thought—Darwinism, Freudianism, and Behaviourism—that were on offer at Pembroke.

Articulating religiously inflected alternatives to various materialistic determinisms and dogmatic forms of Christianity became a focal point for Robinson's intellectual curiosity and critique that, I argue, mark her as a distinctly postsecular writer. Robinson's postsecular Christianity is characterized by her refusal to see secularism and Christianity as fundamentally at odds, or even in necessary conflict, with one another.

In an essay titled "Memory," Robinson confounds the categories of Christian and secular by declaring: "I am a Christian, [but] other loyalties are important to me, secularism, for example."[263] This conflation gets explored in greater detail in her essay "Son of Adam, Son of

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[261] Marilynne Robinson, "Credo," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 36.2 (2008), 27. Rpt. in *Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God": A Casebook*, Eds Wilson H. Kimnach, Caleb J.D. Maskell, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 180 – 182. Robinson also recalls this story in "Jonathan Edwards in a New Light," *Humanities* 35.6 (2014), 14; and "Mind, Conscience, Soul," *What Are We Doing Here?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2018), 183.

[262] "Credo," 27.

[263] Marilynne Robinson, "Memory," *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 159.

Man," in which Robinson looks at various "extravagant notions of the world" prompted by physics and concludes: "There is no need to credit any of these theories in order to reject the claims of the old commonsensical science to have discredited the Christian *mythos*, which is actually rather restrained by comparison."[264] She goes on to claim that for this reason she does not reject the myth, or narrative, of Christianity in favor of science, but

> returns to the original language of [her] faith, crediting its Word as meaningful [… and] accept[ing] it as one among the great givens to be encountered in experience, that is, as a thing that presents itself, reveals itself, always partially and circumstantially, accessible only to tentative apprehension, which means that it is always newly meaningful. In this it is like everything else, but much more so.[265]

As she does in numerous essays, Robinson collapses the supposedly mutually exclusive categories of Christianity and secularism through an epistemology that is at once comfortable with uncertainty and focused upon the fundamental mysteries of ontology that are experienced through experience itself.

In another interview, Robinson explains a bit more clearly how Christian dogma and creeds are not unnecessary but must always be secondary to this mysterious encounter with being. In other words, creeds and statements place limits—sometimes helpful, sometimes constricting—on one's experience of reality: "Creeds themselves exist," Robinson tells her interviewer, "to stabilize the intense speculations that religion, which is always about the ultimate nature of things, will inspire."[266] Echoing Wiman, Robinson notes that "Any writer who

[264] Marilynne Robinson, "Son of Adam, Son of Man," *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 240.
[265] Ibid, 241.
[266] Marilynne Robinson, "That Highest Candle," *Poetry.* 190.2 (2007), 130.

has wearied of words knows the feeling of being limited by the things that enable."[267] In other words, one's language and creedal confession are meant to help shape and give meaning to the experience of reality, but they are never meant to be exhaustive. Reality always exceeds our words and our meanings for it, particularly as these words and meanings take new shape and increased depth over time.

Hungerford helpfully notes that for Robinson there is an important connection between the Divine and the human attempts to make meaning of it since both "exceed the 'stabilizing' resources, the formal discursive structures through which human beings attempt to challenge lived experience of the divine and of the world."[268] Both religious life and even literature, according to Hungerford, are the formal containers of the experience of the mysterious heart of reality. To be clear, for Robinson the re-enchanted world is mysterious "not because it is a puzzle yet unsolved, but [because it] is the individual's experience of a reality that constantly reveals itself in unexpected ways."[269] Mystery, as we saw with Wiman, is not a term meant to defer precision, but rather to name the abundance of reality that our language and even our conscious minds are not able to fully contain. In Robinson's Calvinist Christian rendering, the reason for the "excess" of both reality and the human meanings we give it is because "the created order, which always remains mysteriously incomprehensible, communicates the greatness and power of the Creator, which extends far beyond anything perceivable in his creation."[270] This is the heart of Robinson's particularly Christian myth of re-enchantment. According to Robinson, experience can be shaped by this story which gives form and meaning to reality as if it were the theatre of

[267] Ibid

[268] Hungerford, 113.

[269] Annette Aronowicz, "Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, and the Battle for the Soul," *Perichoresis* 15.2 (2017), 42.

[270] Andrew C. Stout, "A Little Willingness to See": Sacramental Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*," *Religion and the Arts* 18 (2014), 572.

God's glory.[271] This theological move separates Robinson from other twentieth century thinkers whose existentialism and phenomenology was often a bold move to value inward experience in a world where God was presumed dead. It is also to separate her from the functional Deism that saw God's creative act as a one-time event from which God remained detached.

Of course, not all scholars of Robinson are convinced she is a postsecular writer, particularly as laid out by John McClure in *Partial Faiths*. In an interview, Robinson was asked if she understood herself to be "postsecular" despite having a "'strong' form religiosity,"[272] as opposed to the non-dogmatic "weak religion" characteristic of postsecular writers. Robinson's somewhat biting response is telling of her skepticism against her interviewers' assumptions about "strong" forms of religion. In her rejoinder, Robinson makes it clear that she understands her own work as similar to her American literary peers who might not share her commitment to recovering a distinct form of Christian thought, yet are still open to seeking an appropriate language for their encounter with all the mysteries of being:

> The idea that one system of belief must categorically exclude others seems to me to have arisen when people stopped reading and teaching theology. Our idea of what a "strong theology" would look like or mean is really the result of speculation colored by more than a little condescension. The great theologians themselves, from Paul onward, were much more interested in the inarticulable every religion tries to find words for. […] I find my "strong theology" extraordinarily beautiful, and I love all the thought and learnedness, and the great seriousness, I find in it. That said, the choices these other writers make are interesting and very fruitful. A movement back toward the sense of

[271] For more on this, see: Belden C. Lane, "Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1.1 (2001): 1 – 30.

[272] "Interview with Stevens," 265.

> sacredness is more likely than sectarianisms to refresh our sense of the meaning of religion and theology as well.[273]

In many ways, Robinson's insight here reiterates Taylor's understanding of our secular age as the site where multiple claims, narratives, and myths are on offer about the nature of reality from both religious and nonreligious people. But what is most telling—and will have the largest ecological implications—is that many of these postsecular movements (whether confessionally Christian or otherwise) are countering the post-Enlightenment narratives about reality and attempting to recover the sense of the sacred in reality.

This sense pervades both science and religion. In her essay "Theology," for example, Robinson argues that the haunting intuitions about reality that prompt scientific exploration are the same intuitions that haunt religious communities: "Religions are expressions of the sound human intuition that there is something beyond being as we experience it in this life. What is often described as a sense of the transcendent might in some cases be the intuition of the actual."[274] Exploring these intuitions of reality communally is what gives Robinson hope that her particular version of re-enchantment, a shared story of ontology that she finds "extraordinarily beautiful," might be entertained. It is also, as I noted earlier, a way for both religion and science to find shared ground in their mutual attention to a world where meaning deepens and unfolds in shared human experiences over time.

With this broader understanding of Robinson's postsecular negotiation between secularism *and* Christianity, I want to turn now to her particular desire to recover a narrative, or a myth, that avoids the destructive, materialist reductions of humanity by championing human exceptionalism. To do this, we need to look more closely at a project that permeates much of

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[273] Ibid, 266.
[274] Marilynne Robinson, "Theology," *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Picador, 2016), 212.

Robinson's writing: the recovery of the soul. By recovering the soul—the site of human experience in Robinson's rendering—Robinson shows how we might also recover the possibility of a new posture to the world, a posture that has real ecological implications.

Absence of Mind: Recovering the Soul and New Myths of Reality

Robinson's this-worldly theological vision is almost entirely contingent on her attempts to not simply recover the concept of the human soul, but to *transmute it* in the process. For Robinson, the soul is not, first of all, some other-wordly animating spirit that inhabits the physical human body and eludes our senses. Rather, for Robinson, the "soul" is part of the given facticity of material life that all humans encounter. "I find the soul a valuable concept, a statement of the dignity of a human life and of the unutterable gravity of human action and experience," Robinson writes in "Humanism," and she goes on: "I would add that I find my own soul interesting company, if this did not seem to cast doubt on my impeccable objectivity."[275] The soul is primarily the site of inwardness, consciousness, and subjective experience *of* the material world. As such, it is what makes us the most remarkable and complex creatures in the known cosmos. Humans, as possessors of this inward experience, are an integral part *of this* material world yet they are free to act, imagine, create and destroy in ways that no deterministic rendering can explain satisfactorily.

According to Robinson, the recovery of the significance of human *experience* of the soul at work is precisely what is needed in an age held captive by the myth of disenchantment. One of the most dangerous consequences of the desacralizing of the material world is that in objectifying the material world, human perception and subjectivity is marginalized and

[275] Marilynne Robinson, "Humanism," *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Picador, 2016), 9.

discredited. In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson argues against "an assertive popular literature that describes the mind as if from the posture of science [in order to] discredit the old romantic myth of the self still encouraged by religion."[276]

Robinson's desire to recover what she calls human exceptionalism is not to lock her into a destructive anthropocentrism. Rather, it is her attempt to explore how the soul is uniquely capable of participating in the Being of reality, and, by extension, the God who is the sustaining source of that Being every moment. Robinson's ecological vision, although rarely covered by ecocritics,[277] thus treats the destruction of the world as "an atrocious crime of the most cosmic proportions"[278] because, as writers such as Jonathan Edwards revealed to her, it is to make meaningless the ordered (and ordering) address of God from which all reality springs. Robinson conflates mind and soul throughout these (and other) essays, but her point remains: the narrative of disenchantment ultimately disregards and denigrates "the self, the solitary, perceiving, and interpreting locus of anything that can be called experience."[279] The soul is what allows humans to encounter the mystery (defined above) of the world, it is "that part of us that encounters what is hidden and yet present all around us."[280]

Robinson's critique of these reductive anthropologies does not pit Christianity or religion *against* the secular. Throughout *Absence of Mind* she also argues that a new form of Christian theology is necessary today because "to some extent even theology has embraced impoverishment, often under the name of secularism, in order to blend more thoroughly into a disheartened cultural landscape. To the great degree that theology has accommodated what she

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[276] *Absence of Mind,* 2.

[277] See George Handley, "The Metaphysics of Ecology in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping," MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (Fall 2009): 496 – 521.

[278] Thomas Schaub and Marilynne Robinson, "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," *Contemporary Literature* 35.2 (Summer 1994), 249.

[279] Ibid, 7.

[280] Aronowicz, 51.

calls "the parascientific"[281] worldview, it too has tended to forget the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul, that is, of the world as perceived in the course of a human life, of the mind as it exists in time."[282] What Robinson means by this is something I have already noted in Wiman (and will note much more explicitly in Berry), which is that modern forms of Christianity are not in themselves sources of re-enchantment; in fact, many are often beholden to a myth of disenchantment.

In a later essay, "The Sacred, The Human," Robinson expands on some of these ideas to more clearly articulate just why a Christian humanism is necessary and what she means by arguing for a human exceptionalism. In that essay, Robinson shares her anecdote regarding Edwards and moonlight to reiterate her belief that "The Creation is constantly renewed as an act of God, who therefore remains free relative to his creation. […] He is also therefore pervasively present and engrossed in it."[283] Such freedom and dynamism are realities in which humans, as image bearers of this creator, participate. Yet this distinctly Christian framing, Robinson asserts, "has been marginalized as unnecessary and implausible"[284] by a modern scientific discourse that has "forebade metaphysics as a language and as a mode of thought, which amounted to radically narrowing the questions it would or could address while jettisoning a great part of Western tradition."[285] Recovering this tradition, for Robinson, is a major source of her project in helping

[281] Robinson notes that by "parascientific" she means "a robust, and surprisingly conventional genre of social or political theory or anthropology that makes its case by proceeding, using the science of its moment, from a genesis of human nature in primordial life to a set of general conclusions about what our nature is and must be, together with the ethical, political, economic and/or philosophic implications to be drawn from these conclusions. Its author may or may not be a scientist himself. One of the characterizing traits of this large and burgeoning literature is its confidence that science has given us knowledge sufficient to allow us to answer certain essential questions about the nature of reality, if only by dismissing them." *Absence of Mind*, 32 – 33.

[282] *Absence of Mind,* 35.

[283] Marilynne Robinson, "The Sacred, the Human," *What Are We Doing Here?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2018), 51.

[284] Ibid, 52.

[285] Ibid, 54.

her readers understand their place in Western tradition and, more particularly, recovering the liberation of thought that attends recovering the metaphysical vocabulary shorn by modern scientism.

The exceptionalism of the human person that Robinson is attempting to recover tries to escape the determinisms that attend various post-Enlightenment myths about the human person. Such narratives of the human person render them determined by their own biology and, thus, not free. Yet for Robinson this is precisely the space in which the exceptionalism of humanity—which is potentially creative and destructive—needs to be understood. The human, for Robinson, is not determined by a predisposition merely to survive, but rather to act freely and indeterminately. Only through such freedom is love for the world possible. Robinson makes an intriguing move, though, by asserting that such freedom does not necessarily have to wait for religious recovery; in fact, science is already revealing this: "If our Being participates in something as mysterious and irreducible as quantum physics—and how could it not?—the presumption ought to be on the side of extraordinary human complexity."[286] Robinson will tether this participation to a participation in the God who underwrites all Being, but Robinson's interest in real science (as opposed to parascientific discourse suggests that it is also capable of inducting us "to a revival of the final awe at the wonder of creation so characteristic of theology."[287] Humans, as physical bodies, are as mysterious and complex as the material world in which they interact and of which they are made. For Robinson, this is a ground upon which both scientist and theologian can occupy without hostility or conflict. Both can operate from a story of re-enchantment that provides meaning for how we perceive and experience reality.

[286] Ibid, 59.
[287] Ibid

But more than this, as souls—as experiencing beings capable of cognition and metacognition—Robinson argues that our true exceptionality is our ability to "define goodness" and our obligation to act on it.[288] Materialist determinisms provide no *satisfying* answer, at least for Robinson, to the conundrum of altruism or even how one ought to behave towards others or the non-human environment. It is the retrograde Congregationalists and Puritans, particularly Jonathan Edwards, Robinson argues, who provide a more expansive vision of the human person and of reality that is not fixated on some otherworldly plane of heaven, but rather "makes any other person potentially or, in any moment, actually a revelation of the nature of God, as the brilliance of creation is also."[289]

When I talk about Robinson's vision of a re-enchanted myth of the human person in the world, it is precisely along these lines. In this rendering, which Robinson admits owes much to the neglected (and oft-maligned) legacy of Reformed theological thought in American culture, humanity is not only capable of, but responsible for, their highest human capacities of generosity and love, intelligence and beauty.[290] According to Robinson, the soul is the means by which humans "participate in the revelation that saturates experience, since Being itself is an emanation from God."[291] There is no easy sundering of God and world, of embeddedness in the material and embeddedness in the metaphysical in Robinson's rendering. The vision of human exceptionalism that motivates her project is one that challenges determinism by suggesting that our greatest hope in the Anthropocene is tethered to our greatest vulnerability: we are free to do good and, thus, also free to do evil. Annette Aronowicz notes the stakes of this debate with bleak clarity: "To be engaged in the battle for the soul is to be watchful for signs of that

[288] Ibid, 66.
[289] Ibid, 67.
[290] Ibid
[291] Ibid

dehumanization for, increasingly, the objectifying gaze is not just a matter of contemplation but also of projected manipulation through biotechnical means."[292]

Robinson's focus on the significance of human experience over institutional ideological positions is integral to understanding both her ecological and theological vision. Robinson's 1989 collection of essays, *Mother Country,* remains one of the works for which she is most proud.[293] These essays criticized "England's dumping of nuclear waste into the sea at the Sellafield Nuclear Plant."[294] Robinson claims that such acts of ecological destruction are products of "moral aphasia" and that "our education produces an acculturated blindness which precludes our taking in available, unambiguous information if it is contrary to our assumptions."[295] For Robinson, such recklessness that is obviously self-destructive is a profound moral failure. But more than this—and perhaps the reason "Robinson's form of environmentalism has not sat well with environmentalists"[296]—is that ecological destruction occurs when people allow the purveyors of modern mythologies to gain such a hold on the collective imagination that people no longer trust their own experiences of a place. Rather, they rely too heavily on the "right rhetoric or institutions [that] will do the work of judgment for them."[297]

Robinson does not trust such organizationally-backed narratives because they often become hardened ideologies—or closed takes--that lean heavily on the authority of a supposedly

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[292] Aronowicz, 51.

[293] George Handley makes a mention of this in his article, but notes it was only recorded in a personal communication. George B. Handley. "Religion, Literature, and the Environment in the Work of Marilynne Robinson," *This Life, This World: New Essays on Marilynne Robinson's* Housekeeping, Gilead, *and* Home. Ed. Jason Stevens (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2016), 59.

[294] Ibid

[295] Marilynne Robinson, *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1989), 27.

[296] Handley, 62.

[297] Ibid, 63.

objective science that seeks control and power over a place while minimizing the lived experience of people who inhabit such places.[298] While Robinson's battle with Greenpeace, an institution she argued was complicit in the Sellafield disaster, has received much attention and notoriety when it comes to her ecological writing,[299] what intrigues me is Robinson's insistence that any ecological vision must be tethered to the individual and communal *experience* of a landscape. Ecology, for Robinson then, is a matter of the soul. In an interview with literary critic George Handley, Robinson claims that any human investment in landscape is an "investment of soul […]. The best defense, the best sort of on-the-ground defense for any landscape is to have people love it, and any landscape deserves that."[300] One's love of the land is rooted to one's shared experience of the land. And our experience of the land is mediated by the stories we tell, the myths we live by.

Ideology—religious or secular—is inadequate for properly regarding and valuing human experience. Therefore, for Robinson, we need to lean less on ideology and more on story, on narratives, that form and give meaning to human experience. In *Absence of Mind,* Robinson makes a clever rhetorical maneuver, ceding ground to a disenchanted scientism, by temporarily looking at life *as if* it were "stripped of myth, unhallowed and unhaunted."[301] In this guise, she muses that even if there were no spiritual or metaphysical world with which we had to grapple, this still could not "impoverish experience."[302] Just as Robinson adopts a persona in the opening of her essays who lives *as if* the world were disenchanted, any re-enchantment requires a form of human experience that will live *as if* it were enchanted. Robinson's phenomenological shift does

[298] In this manner, Robinson's argument echoes that made of Robert MacFarlane in *Landmarks*.

[299] Greenpeace actually filed a Libel suit against Marilynne Robinson and her book, *Mother Country*, is still effectively banned in the U.K.

[300] Handley, George and Lance Larsen, "The Radiant Astonishment of Existence: Two Interviews with Marilynne Robinson, March 20, 2004 and February 9, 2007," *Literature and Belief* 27.2 (2007), 116 – 117.

[301] Ibid

[302] Ibid

not sit well with secularists who maintain such "as if" claims are merely delusions nor with Christians who claim that God is an objective, universal truth whether He is acknowledged or not. Robinson's shift to experience does not sit well with both sides.

This tension exists because it has everything to do with Robinson's context and the liminal position she occupies between secular and Christian communities. Hungerford argues that Robinson's focus on the "experience" of religion as opposed to doctrinal, propositional truths is a move necessitated by the secular age in which she writes.[303] If we recover the value of the human mind defined as the seat of human experience of the world, Robinson argues, the human propensity for religious belief, and even belief in God, becomes much more palatable. Recovering the significance of human experience allows the postsecular *conditions* for the reception of belief—for a new myth—to change.

To make this move, many of Robinson's essays dismantle the current model of reality based on disenchantment. This is possible because all models of reality are ultimately myths, or stories. In her 2005 essay "Facing Reality" Robinson notes this, although using the term "fiction" rather than myth; she remarks:

> Our present model of the world is a fiction, based on notions of objectivity and of the character and implications of science, which are a hundred years out of date. […]. As a fiction writer, I feel smothered by this collective fiction, this Reality. I do not admire it or enjoy it, this work of grim and minor imagination which somehow or other got itself acknowledged as The Great Truth and The Voice of Our Time because of rather than despite its obvious thinness and fraudulence.[304]

[303] Hungerford, 24.

[304] Marilynne Robinson, "Facing Reality," *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005), 77.

Robinson's use of "fiction" here is similar to Midgley's use of "myth" in that she is articulating that our experience of reality is always contingent on the shared narratives that give meaning.[305] How one perceives reality is indeed a process of *communal* figuration and negotiation, and is therefore up for grabs in the contested space of the secular age.

And Robinson believes our ability to understand "these collective fictions matter [because] they have the profoundest influence on what we know and see and understand."[306] Yet because our mythologies, or fictions, orient us, they are also quite capable of misleading. For instance, "When they make fear the key to interpretation of history and experience, as they do so often, as ours does now," Robinson warns, "nothing contains a greater potential for releasing all the varieties of destruction."[307] The stories one tells, these collective fictions from which one operates, are not benign.

Gilead: Experiencing the World as God's Theatre

Robinson maintains that a "better story"—a better lived mythology—could be found in theology. However, this must be a Christian theology that is at once informed by modern science and one that rejects the disenchanted forms of thought that disregard the exceptionalism of the human soul. Such a theology, Robinson argues, is particularly needed for the present moment. In this section, I will turn to a reading of Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, but it is important for my particular project to highlight, at the outset of this reading, that *Gilead* is deeply shaped by Robinson's particular theological vision articulated within the context of the secular age.

[305] See Chapter One, particular regarding Mary Midgley's work on myth.
[306] "Facing Reality," 77.
[307] Ibid, 77 – 78.

In "Theology for this Moment," a talk given in 2016, Robinson lays out a vision for how theology—Christian theology in particular—might become capable of better addressing the various reductions inherent to modern life. Whereas Bacon believed religious belief was an "idol of the theater" that inhibited enlightened thought, Robinson recovers the notion of the world as an icon of God's theatre. Indeed, Robinson argues that theology could be poised to address the contemporary secular, Anthropocene age by encouraging people to imagine the cosmos as if it were God's theater.[308] I use the phrase "as if" because Robinson seems reticent to assert with any absolute certitude that material reality is, in fact, such a thing. In postsecular fashion, Robinson hesitates to say that such a vision—which draws on the Reformed theologian John Calvin who, in turn, draws on Scripture—is anything more than another contestable "account" on offer in the secular age:

> We cannot say that the stars were arrayed to instruct us in the glory of God, to dispose our minds to wonder, to make us feel our finitude within an order of Being for which millennia are more transient than a breath. This, for all we know, is the accidental consequence of the accidental emergence of the constellations […] We must step back and acknowledge that any accounts of the initial moments that make the event seem straightforward and comprehensible are deeply wrong.[309]

Such reticence, I maintain, is part of Robinson's postsecular disposition that makes her uncomfortable with any truth claims that are not understood to be provisional and open to change. But what is notable in Robinson's account is her desire to return to the "initial moments"

[308] Marilynne Robinson, "Theology for this Moment," *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2018), 36.

[309] Ibid, 47.

of Being—of the existence of material reality—and see this encounter as a necessary first step for all forms of thought.

Robinson argues that the theology needed for the present moment must begin by first encountering the mysterious nature of existence, of Being. Such an encounter of the unfolding givenness of material reality is, for Robinson, the starting point and the shared ground of the best theology *and* science. Robinson does not use the term disenchantment in the essay, but her rationale for advocating such a starting point is that "we have estranged ourselves from Being."[310] In the Anthropocene, such estrangement, I have been arguing, is precisely the consequence of the lived myth of disenchantment. Robinson then goes on to suggest that theology, informed by science, must revive the "irreducible thrill of the universe"[311] which requires a new narrative that is not prone to reductions. In the context of this project, it requires a new way to experience the world, one infused with the awe and wonder at a material world.

This theological vision Robinson lays out in this 2016 lecture is already, in many ways, enacted much earlier through the novel *Gilead*. In what follows, I will explore how Robinson's vision of a re-enchanted world emerges, first, through the postsecular tensions of belief and unbelief. These tensions are manifested primarily through the conflicted, generational relationship of John Ames (the narrator of *Gilead*), his Atheist brother Edward, and their father. This fraught familial relationship is fractured along lines of belief and unbelief, Christianity and Atheism. However, while fathers and sons seem to be severed from one another, the mutual respect between the brothers (one Atheist, one Christian) reveals another possibility for a postsecular way to experience the world. More, the trajectory of John Ames indicates a way forward for Christian theology in the secular age. John Ames emerges from this relationship as a

[310] Ibid, 48.
[311] Ibid, 47.

Christian pastor whose theology is deeply informed and shaped by the secular materialist thought of his Feuerbach-reading brother Edward. I will then explore more fully just how Ames' theological vision is informed by secular thought in ways that make it much more attentive to the excessive, unfolding quality of the material world.

After understanding how Robinson frames Ames as a postsecular, theological voice, I want to then focus in on an early episode in the novel, the journey John Ames and his father take to the unmarked grave of their deceased forebear. Just as Robinson noted above that a theology "for this moment" must attend to the mysterious origins of Being, the journey of Ames and his father to the grave enacts this journey in significant ways. In this journey to a site of familial death, I argue, Robinson allows John Ames to have a profound encounter with Being that causes him to experience material reality as the mysteriously unfolding theater of God's glory. This journey and its significance are reflected upon repeatedly throughout the narrative and become a key site for Robinson's exploration of a re-enchanted world. Through this journey, Ames (and Robinson's audience) encounter a new myth by which to live in the world, one that catalyzes a potentially healthier way of understanding, attending, and even loving all that is not the self.

The novel *Gilead* discloses the life story of John Ames, a dying pastor of a small-town Congregationalist church in the 1950s. *Gilead* is told from John Ames' perspective but written as a second-person address to both Ames's young son Robbie and, I argue, to Robinson's contemporary audience. That is, *Gilead* addresses the secular age and Anthropocene era in subtle yet profound ways.

The secular age tensions are manifest primarily in the relationship between John Ames and his brother Edward. I largely agree with Hungerford, who claims that "John Ames is a character fully imagined to be living within Charles Taylor's secular age: he emerges in *Gilead*

as a believer profoundly aware of the possibility—even the plausibility—of unbelief."[312] What Hungerford does not explore, however, is how this tension leads Ames to significant generational and ecological insights. Nevertheless, it is within this conflicted space of belief and unbelief, certainty and doubt that Ames's experience of the world becomes ecologically instructive.

The tensions of the secular age are most poignantly felt in the novel by the relationship Ames has with his older brother Edward. The two brothers represent two paths one might take in the secular age in which the conditions of belief have changed. Edward goes off to Europe to prepare for the ministry—a family tradition of sorts—but comes back a Feuerbach-and-Marx-reading atheist.[313] Edward becomes symbolic of the American insecurity of looking to the elites of Europe to set the intellectual and cultural trends and, as such, he denigrates his home town and desires to take "a bit of the Middle West out of [Ames]."[314] The parochialism and backwardness of the American Midwest is, for Edward, a laughable source of derision. Edward and his father, a Christian pastor, eventually reach an intractable conflict when Edward refuses to bless the meal out of an appeal to his conscience.[315] This is ironic because it is precisely in the act of blessing in the material world that Edward's believing brother, John, finds Feuerbach so instructive. Nevertheless, as an atheist, Edward becomes a troubling enigma to his believing parents and the narrative he chooses to live by becomes a way for him to detach from his familial line, the very source of his existence. This detachment very much makes Edward the prototypical modern man, detached from his source.

[312] Hungerford, 24.
[313] *Gilead,* 25.
[314] Ibid, 24.
[315] Ibid, 26.

However, John Ames refuses to paint a caricatured version of his brother Edward as some wayward, lost atheist. In fact, Ames provides a rather affectionate, empathetic treatment of Edward whose atheism is contested, but never a source of unbridgeable conflict. Ames (like Robinson) operates from a posture of openness and allows his belief to be shaped by the secular thought of his brother who intentionally leaves behind his copy of Feuerbach as a gift (in much the same way that Ames, by novel's end, leaves the same book behind for his son, Robbie). Ames's this-wordly theological vision that emerges in his life is not a reaction *against* the disenchanted materialism of his brother *per se* but inflected by its insights. Ames' love and joy for *this* world finds common ground with Feuerbach who is, Ames says, "as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world."[316] While Feuerbach's "one error" is that he wants "religion to just stand out of the way,"[317] Ames's appreciation and eventual use of Feuerbach in his theology encourages, I argue, a postsecular reading of Ames.

Ironically, while Edward's severance from the family comes through his refusal to bless the food by saying "Grace," Ames finds Feuerbach to be more instructive on the nature of blessing in the material world than many theologians. Quoting Feuerbach, Ames notes that "[Water] is the image of the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit. [Water] has a significance in itself, as water; it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit."[318] And throughout the novel water and baptism and blessing become significant touchstones in Ames' ministry.

Robinson situates Ames's theological vision of this world and its sacred character first within a framework inspired and guided by Feuerbach, a materialist thinker understood by many

[316] Ibid, 24.
[317] Ibid
[318] Ibid, 23 – 24.

American Christians to be detrimental to the truth of Christian theology. But Robinson does not frame Feuerbach in terms of his propositional truth statements. Rather, through Ames, she wonders just what Feuerbach "means" for the Christian faith. Robinson's choice here, Hungerford argues, is an important postsecular move. When Ames, later in the narrative, is reflecting on an article entitled " God and the American People," published in 1948 in *Ladies' Home Journal*, Ames reflects on "the oddness of the phrase 'believe in God.'"[319] He is struck by the oddness of the phrase as recalls "that first chapter of Feuerbach, which is really about the awkwardness of language and not about religion at all."[320] The cross-pressure Ames feels, however, is that belief in God is not something that can so easily be quantified in a poll. Precisely what this means is complex, particularly in the secular age of contested narratives. One's beliefs of God are contingent on one's experience of reality and the story that gives shape to it.

Ames then rejects the rationalist, polemical stance of certain twentieth century Christian apologists who would fan the flames of conflict between believers and unbelievers. Rather, Ames's belief is couched in his humble uncertainty that remains appreciative of the insights Feuerbach brings to religious discourse, even while he disagrees with them. The problem with Feuerbach, according to Ames, are not his "attacks" on religion, but that the narrative about reality he assumes might be too limited. This leads Ames to confront Being and work out what myth might be adequate to account for it.

Ames notes that Feuerbach's thought has limited meaning because he "doesn't imagine the possibility of an existence beyond this one."[321]That such a materialistic understanding of

[319] Ibid, 143.
[320] Ibid
[321] Ibid

matter excludes this possibility is, in Taylor's vocabulary, to accept a closed spin rather than to remain open to various takes. Ames, unlike his brother, attempts to encounter Being by remaining open to the possibility that God might be "a reality embracing this one but exceeding it, the way for example, the world embraces and exceeds Soapy's understanding of it."[322] Soapy is their cat. Reality for Soapy, Ames goes on, is quite unlike the reality humans experience, and "the degrees of unlikeness within the reality we know are very extreme, and what I wish to suggest," Ames writes, "is a much more absolute unlikeness, with which we exist, though our human circumstance creates in us a radically limited and peculiar notion of what existence is."[323] While Ames appreciates Feuerbach's loving attention to this world, he also believes that such attention does not necessarily exclude the possibility of perceiving this world as participating in a reality that exceeds our linguistic and conceptual grasps. Such a perspective requires an ability to *believe* a different narrative about humans and the world. But such belief is, according to Ames, a rather mysterious gift that some accept, and others—like Edward—reject.

Hungerford's work on Robinson's form of Christian belief clarifies how these (and other) passages mark a strategic shift in writing about belief in contemporary American literature. I argue that this shift is inflected by the conditions and what Taylor calls the "cross pressures" of the secular age. Ames addresses the "conflict" narratives that afflict the church in the mid-twentieth century, but he warns his son that "many of the attacks on belief that have had such prestige for the last century or two are in fact meaningless. I must tell *you* this, because everything else I have told you, and them, loses almost all its meaning and its right to attention if this is not established."[324] Hungerford points out that "the choice of the word 'meaningless' is

[322] Ibid
[323] Ibid
[324] Ibid, 144.

crucial: he does not say that the arguments are wrong, or mistaken, but that they do not participate in the religious practice of making experience open upon meaning."[325] For Robinson, belief creates a "religiously understood reality,"[326] or, in the language of this project, it creates the myth by which one lives in the world and gives meaning to reality.

John Ames provides a way to perceive the world "as if" it was not simply an arena for human survival, but as the theatre of God's glory. This is the fundamental Christian myth of re-enchantment through which Ames experiences reality and it is drawn from the theology of John Calvin. Perceiving the earth as God's theater, Belden Lane argues, was theologian John Calvin's "favorite metaphor in speaking of the natural world" and by it, Calvin believed "all created reality, extending each moment from the hand of God, is shot through with longing."[327] For Calvin, perceiving the world in such a way leads one to perform "deliberate practices of delight."[328] In his *Institutes,* Calvin reacted against the tendencies within Christian thought towards Deism, writing that "to make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his works, would be cold and barren."[329] For Calvin, and for John Ames who lives within the narrative framework of Calvin's theology, "creation is a continuing event, ever unfolding from the hand of God, ever responding in praise."[330]

In "Theology for this Moment," Robinson also concludes her address by making the provocative proposal that the most necessary theology for the contemporary malaise of the modern world would involve a recovery of precisely this metaphor for the world:

[325] Hungerford, 116.
[326] Ibid
[327] Lane, 1.
[328] Ibid.
[329] *Institutes,* I.16.1
[330] Lane, 5.

> [A] theology for our time should help us know that Being is indeed the theater of God's glory, and that, within it, we have a terrible privilege, a capacity for profound error and grave harm. We might venture an answer to God's question, Where were you when I created - ? We were there, potential and implicit and by the grace of God inevitable, more unstoppable than the sea, impervious as Leviathan, in that deep womb of time, almost hearing the sons of God when they shouted for joy. And we are here, your still-forming child, still opening our eyes on a reality whose astonishments can never exhaust.[331]

Robinson's concluding remarks here provide a contained summation of the theological vision that undergirds *Gilead* and, particularly, undergird its distinctly Christian myth of re-enchantment. As performers within this great theatre of Being, Robinson notes that we are capable of profound acts of destruction and desecration. Yet by attending closely to our source, the Being which modern men are detached from, Robinson urges theology to inculcate a posture to the world that is fille with wonder at the excessive, unfolding givenness of reality. Returning to our source of Being, is, for Robinson, a return to a re-enchanted participation with the material world and its source.

Understanding the world as God's theatre properly qualifies Robinson's attention to the soul as site of human experience and, thus, exceptionalism. Because while her focus on human exceptionalism might suggest an unhealthy, or even dangerous, anthropocentrism, understanding the world as *God's* theatre—and not human's—radically decenters the human and puts important limits to the exceptional aspects of the soul. By framing reality along these lines, the experiencing self exists first in relation to the source of its Being before it is in relation to any other person or place or object. Experience of reality is always, for Robinson, experience *in*

[331] "Theology for this Moment," 49.

relation to a given world of which the experiencing self is a recipient. The world is not, as the myth of disenchantment suggests, something that humans take or even construct, but rather it is a gift that is received. This is a humbling reality. The posture to the world it should invoke is gratitude first.

The reception and perception of gifts are indicative of the ways in which belief forms experience and perception and provide a glimpse into how Robinson's myth of re-enchantment operates in *Gilead.* Gifts include things like belief, but are also physical, natural objects. One of the more potent instances of such gifts is told as a memory that Ames returns to several times in his narrative. He recalls a time when his father takes from a burned church an ash covered biscuit and hands it to his son. In his memory of that experience, Ames notes:

> That biscuit ashy from my father's charred hand. It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for. If I could only give you what my father gave me. No, what the Lord has given me and must also give you. But I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift.[332]

In a sense, the giving of an ashy biscuit is a simple, mundane act of a father providing for his child. Yet Ames notes that his language is inadequate for the excessiveness of meaning he can take from this seemingly simple experience. Tae Sung comments that throughout *Gilead* such gifts "emerge somewhere between history and memory, between fact and interpretations, between the ashy biscuit given for a meal and received as communion."[333] Ames's religious belief opens his experience up into new depths of meaning. It is important to hear how Ames understands his belief as a gift that his father did not give him, but the Lord (his Creator) gave him.

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[332] *Gilead*, 114.
[333] Sung, 1.

In the secular age, to receive the gift of belief—the gift that opens one up the possibility of a re-enchanted world along Christian lines—requires a leap of faith made difficult within the immanent frame.[334] Secularity closes one from the possibility of receiving this gift of belief in another counter-narrative about reality. Indeed, while Edward is one example from someone who is buffered from receiving such a gift of belief, at the end of the novel, Jack Boughton is also someone we remain uncertain of in terms of his reception of belief or not. But as Ames meditates on gifts and his desire to give the gift of belief to his son, he realizes that such a gifting is largely out of his control. For this reason, Ames tells Robbie to simply put himself "in the way of the gift."[335] Tae Sung remarks that "to be in the way of the gift is to have an interpretive framework that is open to moral sources. In the religious (Calvinist) framework of the novel, this openness requires a narrative of how the gifts function: it cannot be generated by the self."[336] For my purposes, I am intrigued to return back to how the Calvinist "interpretive framework" of God's theater that Robinson and Ames operate within provides a new posture to the world and to others.

Ames requires a narrative structure to provide meaning for his experience, but he does not believe that the human is the creative source of that meaning. Rather, believing himself to be living within the theater of God's glory, Ames locates the source of meaning and the excessive quality of the mundane world to be a product of their shared relationship to the God who speaks them into existence and continually sustains them.

This narrative even helps explain how Pastor Ames came to exist, as it were, in the fictional world of *Gilead*. In various interviews Robinson notes that the voice of Ames "came to

[334] *A Secular Age,* 309.
[335] *Gilead,* 114.
[336] Sung, 4.

her after several days of being alone."[337] Chad Wriglesworth argues that Robinson's Christian narrative framework moves outside the text in ways that help explain her own creative process. Such inspiration for a character is, in this rendering, a rather inexplicable *gift*. Yet Wriglesworth suggests that "from a theological perspective, Robinson's life and craft are shaped within a cosmos that *was* and *still is* being addressed by God."[338] Wriglesworth is drawing here on theologian Rowan Williams who argues in an essay "Changing the Myths We Live By" (inspired clearly by the work of Mary Midgley), that

> [t]he Christian believes that creation exists because God speaks in both: Hebrew and Christian Scripture the Word of God is the foundation of everything. In Eastern thought especially, this theme was developed in some depth, drawing out the implication that creation is itself an act of communication, a form of language. Creation is an address, an action that expresses an intelligence and asks for intelligent response.[339]

This understanding of the creation as tethered to the Creator through a form of communication makes sense of the various patterns of call and response one finds in *Gilead*. In the opening line, for instance, Ames writes: "I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old,"[340] The lengthy, excessive run-on sentence here is a playful dialogue that sets the novel in motion. Ames, the father, is about to be absent and his letter is a way of staying present for his son and, even while he is hidden from sight. The move allows for continued ongoing encounters

[337] Jennifer Holberg, "A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson," *Image* 74 (2013).

[338] Chad Wriglesworth, "The Thing I Would Like, Actually, Is to Bless You": Acknowledging the Soul in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, *Crux* 52.3-4 (2016), 28 – 40.

[339] Rowan Williams, "Changing the Myths We Live By," *Faith in the Public Square* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 277.

[340] *Gilead,* 3.

of son with absent father. The meanings of the letters, just like the meanings of Ames experiences that he recounts in those letters, will shift through time.

The world, in such a narrative framework, is a place of unfolding mystery on both grand and particularized levels of experience. This is why Ames marvels at soap bubbles rising[341] and baseballs rotating[342] as microsmic instantiations of the same patterns and forms one perceives in planets and galaxies forming and collapsing. All are responses to the creative summons of their source of Being. The discrepancies between durations of events or the physical size of objects find unity in their shared relationship to the God who caused and causes each moment of their existence. The experience of such a reality—formed as it is by belief in the notion of God's theater—is an encounter with a reality that overflows the boundaries of language or mental concepts.

Ames notes this when he thinks about how people often use the word "just" to stress excess and particularity by saying things like "the sun just *shone* and the tree just *glistened*, and the water just *poured* out" as a way to "call attention to a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree."[343] (It is interesting, that this exuberant, joy filled response to the brilliance of the material world is preceded by a "mention of Feuerbach and joy."[344])

Ames's understanding of the world as God's theater clarifies the role that blessing plays in the text as well. In Ames's rendering, the material world is filled with excessive meaning because it is the site where God continuously reveals and conceals His grandeur. Again, in "Theology for this Moment," Robinson notes that a good Christian theology provides a

[341] Ibid, 9.
[342] Ibid, 17.
[343] Ibid, 28.
[344] Ibid, 27.

meaningful narrative about the sacredness of blessing by understanding the connection of Being to God: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Christ was in the beginning with God and without him nothing was made that was made. The categorical blessing put on all that exists […] asserts a very broad, unconditional reality, a givenness that in its fullness reflects divine intent."[345]

Ames repeatedly refers to blessing throughout his narrative, but one of the first moments is in relation to a trip that he and his father take when he is only twelve years old: "That journey was a great blessing to me,"[346] Ames recalls. This trip Ames is referring to acts, I argue, as a central unifying moment in Robinson's vision of a re-enchanted world. It is a site of blessing—a site of the excessiveness of the world as underwritten by God—because Ames returns to it again and again in his memory and the meaning of it deepens and expands. Annette Aronowicz argues that "with each context, the content of the blessing shifts and widens, never leaving the original association with his father, but nevertheless metamorphosing from a containable and pat equivalence between one event and one meaning to something that permeates his entire life in visible and invisible ways."[347] As Ames repeatedly returns in his memories to this journey, it becomes clear how mysterious all human experience is as it unfolds through time. The journey they are referring to is the journey to find the grave of Ames's father's father. This "blessed" journey, as a microsm of life lived in God's theater, is fundamentally a search for the source of one's belonging—or longing to belong—in this life, and this world.

In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson explains this desire to know our lineage, noting that "each of us lives intensely within herself of himself, continuously assimilating past and present

[345] "Theology for this Moment," 37.
[346] Ibid, 17.
[347] Aronowicz, 43.

experience to a narrative and vision that are unique in every case, yet profoundly communicable."[348] The desire to assimilate the past and present in ways that give one a sense of belonging in the world is, for Robinson, a manifestation of life in the natural world as God's theatre. These human longings are, in this interpretive framework, performative desires grounded in "the grandeur of the created order, which already remains mysteriously incomprehensible, that communicates to us the greatness and power of the Creator."[349] Finding one's familial source is rooted in the desire to understand one's ontological source.

Robinson explores genealogies in "Son of Adam, Son of Man," an essay in which she looks at genealogies in the Old Testament and articulates an anthropology derived from a Christian narrative of re-enchantment. Various secular accounts of human origins, Robinson remarks, lean on evolution rendered through a materialist narrative. From such accounts, humans are understood to be an evolved form of animal life, emerging from the material world. Such a narrative, according to Robinson, fails to account for human exceptionality that separates them from other creatures. While these scientific narratives encourage us to "take our place among the animals," she also wonders, if animals might not "feel a bit insulted by our intrusion" since "only in myth or nightmare could another such creature be found. What a thing is man."[350]

The Christian narrative, Robinson argues, counters the "reductive"[351] anthropologies of Darwinism through its insistence that human exceptionalism is derived from being creatures who have souls and, thus, are creatures capable of participating in the world and in the God who is the source of its being. For Robinson, this is what it means to be made in God's image. Human history, Robinson shows through her reading of New Testament genealogies, is "the great

[348] *Absence of Mind,* 132.
[349] Stout, 18
[350] Ibid
[351] Ibid

unfinished portrait of Adam,"[352] who is not simply the fabled first human, but declared a child of God. This theocentric narrative completely reorients how humans might understand themselves in relation to others and the world. Yet it is contingent on a particularly Christian rendering of reality. If God is not simply a human construct, Robinson argues, but a "given"[353] for how we experience the world, then "it is possible to claim a dignity for humankind that is assured because it is bestowed on us [and] it is beyond even our formidable powers to besmirch and destroy."[354] For Robinson the givenness—the gift—of this *reality* is only authenticated through our experience of ourselves and other people as possessors of a dignitary and value that was not constructed for them by others or themselves.

Understanding the world thought this re-enchanted framework allows Robinson to also go beyond simply marveling at the world, but also to restoring its brokenness. Because the God at the heart of her theological vision is not a neutral or benign force, but rather one characterized by love. The gravesite is not only a journey towards death, but a journey with the hopes of some form of reconciliation that require a form of love. The journey is Ames's father's way of being reconciled to the father, the source of being, from which he's become detached.

Ames, reflecting on the causes of his grandfather and father's rupture, remarks that "the old man […] may have been too dazzled by the great light of his experience to realize that an impressive sun shines on us all. Perhaps that is the one thing I wish to tell you [Robbie]. Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time."[355] Robinson layers the meaning of light throughout the novel, making it a metaphor for the enchanted natural world renewed each moment by God's ongoing presence as

[352] "Son of Adam, Son of Man," 256.
[353] Ibid.
[354] Ibid.
[355] Ibid, 91.

well as the experiencing self. Ames suggests that all of our individual experiences are grasping after the *source* of light that shines on and exceeds the human experience that participates in this illuminated Being. Aronowicz argues that "the beauty of the physical light, […] becomes a metaphor for the light at the beginning of creation."[356] But the most important aspect of this light, Aronowicz proceeds in a provocative way, is that it is not simply "the neutral being that surrounds us but *the love and goodness of a personal God*."[357] When Ames comes to delight in the image bearing nature of his own son, he is delighting as a form of love that participates in the love that underwrites the entire theater of God's glory. In a secular age where God's absence is perhaps more poignantly felt, Ames wonders why God withdraws from his theatre just as the sun hides behind the earth at night, but then muses that "the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like a transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only who would have the courage to see it?"[358]

For Robinson, the sacred exceptionality of all humans—proven in both their awesome brilliance and their capacity for destruction—is not merely something constructed in the imagination but an essential feature of a reality that all exists first in responsive relation to a personal God of love. In this framework, the Other—whether human or natural—becomes a site of loving responsibility. Ames tells this to his son by telling him that "when you encounter another person […] it is as if a question is being put to you."[359]

This framing connects to Robinson's particular Christian view of re-enchantment. The others with whom one interacts are not given value and meaning by human interaction. Rather,

[356] Aronowicz, 47.
[357] Ibid, 48.
[358] *Gilead,* 245.
[359] Ibid, 124.

Robinson suggests through Ames, our soul is capable of understanding others "as if" they are "emissaries sent from the Lord" and thus such encounters with others provide a "chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me, [and] you are free to act otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate."[360] This, for Robinson, brings all humans into the theatre of the enchanted world as performers on God's stage in which we "are free to act by [our] own lights. […] Freed at the same time of the impulse to hate or resent."[361] Ames follows this call for loving conduct by reflecting on the Calvinist notion of the *theatrum mundi:*

> Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinarily sense. How well do we understand our role?[362]

The freedom of the soul that Ames articulates here understands the entire cosmos as existing first in relation to God, the source of all Being, before it exists in relation to even our experience. Ames goes on to suggest that such a metaphor of the world reminds us that "the world exists for God's enjoyment, not in any simple sense, of course, but as you enjoy the being of a child even when he is in every way a thorn in your heart."[363] Ames circles back to the broken father-son dynamic, reframing it now in a cosmic and ontological perspective from which reconciliation is possible. He particularizes the idea by again turning to reflect on his brother Edward, estranged now in from his father: "Edward did have a mind of his own, a mind worthy of respect. […] Who knows where any mind comes from. It's all mystery."[364] As explored above, Robinson's

[360] Ibid
[361] Ibid
[362]Ibid
[363] Ibid, 124 – 125.
[364] Ibid, 125.

use of mind is synonymous with soul and experience. By locating the soul's mysteriousness here, she is not, I argue, simply saying we cannot know the other. Rather, she is saying that what we can know of them is their intrinsic value and worth in relation to the shared source of Being in which—in Whom—all minds participate. The mystery is that these minds which are unfolding through time summon us towards a freely given love for which we are responsible.

Ames's journey to his grandfather's grave is a way for Robinson to explore the tension humans experience connected and disconnected from families of origin. The journey brings the young Ames and his father to the brink of life. They almost die of starvation and dehydration until a stranger—living in a domesticated outpost on the edges of civilization—welcomes them into her home for a very humble meal of water and cornmeal mush.[365] The grave is hidden in "the loneliest place you could imagine," Ames recalls; "If I were to say it was going back to nature, you might get the idea that there was some sort of vitality about the place. But it was parched and sun stricken. It was hard to imagine the grass had ever been green."[366] Many of the graves are nameless and Ames's limited understanding of even his own lineage fills this episode with a pervasive uncertainty, compounded by the unreliability of Ames's memory. Ames does not know his family line past the third generation and even in regard to his own father he remarks that "A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension."[367]

Yet despite Ames' ignorance, he also acknowledges a belief that whatever he knows or does not know, he is "profoundly in his [father's] debt."[368] Ames remains aware that the strange miracle of his particular being is absolutely contingent on this largely unknown man. His

[365] Ibid, 12.
[366] Ibid
[367] Ibid, 7.
[368] Ibid

existence was a gift, for which he did nothing, but a gift he received and for which he must give a response.

At the grave, Ames and his father begin the uniquely human work of domestication. They start to tame the wild: "Then [my father] started cutting the brush back with a hand scythe he had brought, and we set up the markers that had fallen over […]. We worked a good while putting things to rights."[369] Making order of the wild becomes, for Robinson, not simply a matter of good ecological behavior, but an instance of the uniquely human capacity of bringing order from disorder, of cultivating life in the face of the apparent meaningless of death. These are quiet, mundane acts of creative love. Just as the strange, nameless lady creates a home at the edge of the world, so Ames and his father cultivate a tiny plot in some forgotten corner of America. For Robinson, such behavior is not futile, but a remarkable testament—or proof—of the capacity and vitality of the human soul to make meaningful, loving experiences that embed us into the material world.

And the natural backdrop for this scene contain important resonances with Robinson's other writing that help to make sense of her particularly Christian myth of re-enchantment. Because while the scene is depicted as a site of death and scorched earth, Ames also recalls that "Everywhere you stepped, little grasshoppers would fly up by the score, making that snap they do, like striking a match."[370] And as they work around the grave, Ames remembers the sounds and signs of ongoing creaturely life: "There was such a sound of grasshoppers, and of wind rattling that dry grass."[371] The phrasing here contains obvious resonances with Robinson's "Preface" to a collected edition of the works of John Calvin, in which she argues that the

[369] Ibid, 13.
[370] Ibid
[371] Ibid

mysterious energy which gives rise to the expansion and flux of the entire cosmos—all its many unfoldings and permutations—is the same energy that animates the human soul. While lengthy, it is worth quoting this passage in full; Robinson argues:

> We feel we know certain things about the physical universe. It is inconceivably vast, it is expanding, and its rate of expansion is accelerating. How do we compare the energy that drives the universe to the energy expended in the *striking of a match?* […] That the striking of a match amounts to virtually nothing in the roar of the universe comparatively speaking, does not in any way lessen its reality or change its nature. And in fact, the energy the match stores and releases, like the mind that contrived it and the hand that holds it, all express that cosmic energy, though how and why we cannot say. We do not bother ourselves with these problems of incommensurability or relationship, though we routinely assume that such imponderables surround us on every side. It is as if the world of daily life existed without reference to those seas of space/time which we know in fact contain it altogether. Only the grandest religious thought has even attempted create a wholly integrated model of reality, typically employing the language of myth or epic to assert human meaning in the context of a dauntingly nonhuman universe. We moderns have abandoned the effort, and for us that seems to serve as an equivalent to solving the problem. […] The Creator is, by [Calvin's] reckoning, utterly greater than any conception we can form of his creation, and at the same time free, present, just, loving, and intimately attentive to fallen humankind, collectively and one by one. It is as if we were to find a tender solicitude toward us in our slightest thoughts. It is as if we were to

> propose that that great energy only exists to make possible our miraculously delicate participation in it.[372]

By disenchanting the world—by removing the possibility of a Creator God—Robinson suggests here, the "dauntingly nonhuman universe" is not easily understood to be a place fit for human meaning or dwelling. Indeed, the presence of life flickering among the graveyard presents Ames with an unavoidable fact about reality: all the distinct forms of life in this world will ultimately return back into the earth from which they emerged.

Handley notes that the fact of nature's indifference to these cycles of life and death creates profound ethical difficulties since "if true [it] implies that human personhood, morality, and imagination as free and undetermined by mechanical laws are obliterated, rendering environmental degradation as meaningless as it is to a fundamentalist awaiting the rapture."[373] (Handley intriguingly notes how such determinisms, borne from a myth of disenchantment, are shared by otherworldly forms of Christianity as well.) Embracing such narratives about reality—even though they align with observable fact—does not provide any ethical basis for human agents to care for the earth or even one another. It does not make cosmic reality a place, let alone a home. Such views endorse a biocentrism that denies human exceptionality and, thus, becomes a form of human nihilism. Robinson's theocentric vision where the world is God's theatre retains the exceptionalism while simultaneously humbling it.

In her interview with George Handley, Robinson indicates that the world's unfolding mysteriousness means that any sense of belonging to it, as humans, is never a simple given:

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[372] Marilynne Robinson, "Preface," *John Calvin: Steward of God's Covenant* Eds. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), xiv.

[373] "Religion, Literature, and the Environment," 70.

> There's nothing stranger than the fact that we exist on a planet. Who does not feel the oddness of this? I mean, stop and think about where we actually are in the larger sense. It seems to me as if every local landscape is a version of the cosmic mystery, that it is very strange that we're here, and that it is very strange that we are what we are. In a certain sense the mystery of the physical reality of the human being is expressed in any individual case by the mystery of a present landscape. The landscape is ours in the sense that it is the landscape that we query. So we're created in the fact of ourselves answering to a particular sense of amazement.[374]

Robinson is not simply articulating that wonder is the appropriate response to the mysterious fact that we exist, but rather that each soul experiencing any particular place is the backdrop for the *theatrum mundi* Ames references earlier. All people and all places have intrinsic value through the myth by which Ames lives and experiences the world. Each place is a significant locus of the ongoing, unfolding mystery of a cosmos that participates in Being. Rather than degrading such places and times through a hermeneutic of condescension (like Edward) or a stance of control and mastery, Robinson explores the possibility of encountering reality by humbly, gratefully receiving it as gift.

The moment at the grave is capped by a clear allusion to the moment that launched Robinson's own explorations of the theological vision of the American Congregationalists. The young Ames, standing beside his praying father and his grandfather's grave, is confronted (in this seeming no-man's-land) by a moment of dazzling wonder, the meaning of which he answers to (or responds to) throughout his life:

[374] Handley and Larsen, 114.

> At first I thought I saw the sun setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just going over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. […] They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon.[375]

This episode is an obvious echo of the footnote in Jonathan Edward's work that satisfied Robinson's ontological longings for a more adequate account of reality than were offered through deterministic materialisms. This scene, according to Robinson was "Edwards's analogy for the continuous renewal of the world by the will of God, which creates, to our eyes, seeming lawfulness and identity, but which is in fact a continuous free act of God."[376] Ames, however, does not explain it away for his son, but just remembers it and returns to it, and lets Robbie (and the reader) experience it vicariously.

This moment, though, has important ecological significance. Arrested—even enchanted—by the cosmic backdrop, Ames's father says: "I would never have thought this place could be beautiful."[377] In a brief moment, Ames and his father experience the unveiling of a large and complex reality that is moving and that contains them and their ability to experience it. It

[375] *Gilead,* 14 – 15.
[376] "Credo," 27.
[377] Ibid

moves them, but not in any deterministic way. This moment gives them a sense, beyond any language or proof, that this particular place matters. It is an unseemly place for the divine, but even here reality is charged with vitality and meaning. Later in the narrative, Ames recalls this moment again, but this time he considers how the human is mysteriously embedded in the material world through an ability to experience it:

> You learn […] what an amazing instrument you are, so to speak, what a power you have to experience beyond anything you might ever actually need. Who would have thought that the moon could dazzle and flame like that? Despite what he said, I could see that my father was a little shaken. He had to stop and wipe his eyes.[378]

In the *Institutes*, Calvin writes: "Wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty, while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory."[379] When Robinson writes her preface to Calvin's work, she argues that it is the soul through which humans are able to exist in communion—or relation—with the material world that is (just like the human family tree) founded and sustained by the Creator: "The beauty of what we see is burdened with truth. It signifies the power of God and his constant grace toward the human creature. It signifies the address of God to the individual human consciousness."[380]

For Robinson, such a theological vision of the soul is not fixed on some afterlife, but attentive to this-world; the "task of the soul," Robinson says in another essay, "is a deep perception of the givenness of this world rather than a looking through or beyond it."[381] In this

[378] Ibid, 47.
[379] *Institutes,* 1.5.1
[380] "Preface," xxiii.
[381] Marilynne Robinson, "Calvinism as Metaphysics," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 25. 2 (2009), 176.

Calvinistic rendering, the sacredness of reality is not hidden beyond this life and this world, but is experienced in the soul's confrontation with it.

The soul, however, does not simply perceive reality, it must also make it cohere through memory and narrative. What would otherwise be disparate fragments, the soul gathers into a provisional whole. *Gilead*, in many ways, is Ames's attempts to order the disparate, complex, mysterious realities of his own life. As he comes to reflect later in the novel, these layers of his experience accumulate because the human body is—much like the light from the sun reflecting off the moon and reaching the human eye—in a constant state of motion and becoming. The profound mystery—or as Ames would say, "miracle"[382]—of existence is that there is any durable, realized self at all. As Ames writes: "Whenever I take a child into my arms to be baptized. I am, so to speak, comprehended in the experience more fully, having seen more of life, knowing better what it means to affirm the sacredness of the human creature. I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory, in retrospect."[383]

In this retrospection, Ames completely flips the disenchanted narrative on its head. The world outside of human experience—outside of human subjectivity—is not some inert and passive material we know in order to control. Rather, it is a communicative world charged with a significance and sacredness that humans do not construct, but rather acknowledge and revere and participate in. The source of Being is, ultimately, love and the response it calls for is love, the kind of love that can restore people to their places and to one another, but only if they have the "courage to see."[384]

[382] Ibid, 51.
[383] Ibid, 91.
[384] Ibid, 245.

As I noted at the outset, I argue that Robinson wrote *Gilead* for a contemporary audience that dwells in the secular age and in the Anthropocene era. Although subtle, *Gilead* is a profound response to the various forms of dis-ease that characterize life in this contemporary world. And by setting the novel in the 1950s, she is giving Americans a glimpse into their own family history and all its fraught tensions between belief and unbelief. *Gilead* complicates the narrative on both sides of the polarized American public. Ames offers an Anthropocene, ill at ease with the destruction of the world and the stance of control wrought through the myth of disenchantment, another way of perceiving humanity and experiencing the world through a myth of re-enchantment. It is telling that in Ames's final lines, he says "I'll pray, and then I'll sleep."[385] In his final notes, as he embarks on the journey into complete uncertainty that lies beyond all human experience, he encourages Robbie to consider a relationship with the unseen source of Being (through prayer) and the relinquishing of control (through sleep.)

The novel's critical success and popularity may seem odd. Yet that the somewhat antiquated, sermonic voice of pastor Ames and his lengthy meditations on baseball, light, water, and the finer points of Calvinist doctrine continues to resonate with many readers in the twenty-first century is a fact of contemporary American culture. This has confounded many. Literary critics such as Randy Boyagoda claim that Robinson's fiction, particularly *Gilead*, remains out of touch with present concerns. According to Boyagoda, *Gilead* has found success because it panders to a contemporary, secular audience fascinated by the antiquated religiosity of an American past that never compels them to live differently. In a recent interview, Boyagoda argues:

[385] *Gilead,* 247.

> Robinson makes it too easy for readers to engage with religious experience through her fiction, because the experience is closed off from us—and in a subtle way, exotic. In many ways, Robinson is the most quietly exotic writer alive today, in that the world of *Gilead* is as exotic to a First World Anglophone reader as a world informed and inspired by an Eastern religion would be. […] In those contexts, religious experience is exotic and has no purchase on you personally. The 1950s small-town and rural Christian experiences of Robinson's fiction have no purchase on us.[386]

Boyagoda's critique of Robinson echoes that of Alan Jacobs' claims from "The Watchmen": Robinson's writing makes no demands on the present, particularly a secular present. Yet Boyagoda's critique misses how *Gilead* is a thoroughly postsecular project targeted to and informed by the polarized, secularized American audience of the twenty-first century.

Gilead is indeed set in the twilight of living American memory—the 1950s of handwritten letters and radio broadcast baseball—but the novel's temporal setting allows Robinson both to speak into and speak against the present context of an American secular culture ill-at-ease with religion and a contemporary American evangelicalism prone to dogmatism and virulent forms of rationalist, tribal apologetic. That Boyagoda and Jacobs both seem to want a clearer apologetic (even combative) stance from Robinson is to ask her to become a part of the very problem—the very posture—her writing is addressing.

For Alan Jacobs the polarization of 2016 concerned the looming election, but for Robinson the polarization she addresses comes over a decade earlier and was due largely to the post 9/11 backlash against all forms of religious extremism and fundamentalism. Alex

[386] Doug Sikkema and Randy Boyagoda, "The Breath of God: A Conversation with Randy Boyagoda," *First Things*, Online. September 9, 2019. Accessed July 2020: https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/09/the-breath-of-god

Engebretson is right to claim that *Gilead* is "best considered within the frame of U.S. cultural and political history after 9/11 [because it] can be read as a response to anxieties surrounding the nation's religious-secular divide."[387] Post-9/11 America saw virulent public rhetoric of anti-religious secular thought and, conversely, vehement anti-secular Christian apologetics. By inviting readers into the temporal landscape of their relatively recent forebears, Robinson unsettles any naive Christian nostalgia for the supposed virtuosity of pre-sexual revolution America and also challenges the secular shorthand by which the 1950s are reductively understood (and usually condemned) as the site of oppressive religious fundamentalisms.[388]

In a way, Robinson's choice of setting *Gilead* in 1950s rural America puts Robinson (and her contemporary audience) on the same significant journey to Kansas that pastor Ames takes with *his* father when they go out to find the gravesite of Ames' grandfather and, thus, gain a sense of their place in the world and that is unfolding in time. By exploring rural America in the 1950s, Robinson is making the case that Americans might gain access to knowledge about where and when they are in the present. The 1950s as a temporal setting is not, as Boyagoda wrongfully claims, a pandering escape at all. There is no 9/11 (or 2016 election for that matter) without this pivotal decade just as there is no child without a parent or grandparent.

All the fracture lines between the religious and secular, faith and doubt that characterize the early twenty-first century context in which Robinson writes exist in 1950s Gilead. The experiencing self like the American nation is, thus, not a free-floating autonomous entity, but something embedded in the unfolding nature of time, something in which it ineluctably participates. For Robinson this American tradition of which she is keenly interested also gives

[387] Engebretson, 52.

[388] A very helpful analysis of contemporary American polarization around misguided nostalgic visions of America can be found in Yuval Levin's *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

way to a more general Western and human tradition. Her fiction explores not simply 1950s America or the living memory of Pastor Ames which reaches back to those who experienced the Civil War, but it goes all the way back (as Wiman appreciated) to the fall of Troy.

Throughout *Gilead*, Robinson invites readers into the inner life of John Ames's experience and leaves them where that experience ends. Robinson also invites readers to have a willingness to see the world in a new, strange light in the secular age and to consider an experience of reality "as if" God is and "as if" the world might be the theatre of his self-revelation. Yet while Robinson's turn inward is perhaps helpful in making the case for a myth of re-enchantment, it is no grounds for knowing *how* to live on the land. That is why brilliant interior reflections on the earth abound in *Gilead*, but actual ecological practice is muted. Indeed, even Ames's final lines counter the historical call for Christians to "Pray and Work" by inviting readers to "Pray and Sleep."

The this-worldly theological vision in *Gilead* reveals a new, humbler, posture to the world. However, this is not enough to show how one might act and work and better honour or care for the material world. Particularly in an Anthropocene age in which techno-industrial advances and the introduction of the machine age have created an entirely new form of relating to the land. The American landscape of the 1950s includes many small-town places like Gilead, but the next decades will see their erosion and erasure as new machines and corporate agriculture overtake the landscapes and imaginations of Americans. To better understand how a distinctly postsecular, Christian re-enchanted vision of the cosmos can redirect human action and work in and for this natural world, we are better served by another contemporary American author: Wendell Berry.

CHAPTER FOUR: WENDELL BERRY

Making a Home in this World

Christian Wiman framed *My Bright Abyss* as a meditation for "modern" believers and Marilynne Robinson intended *Absence of Mind* to challenge the "modern" myth of self that had castigated human experience. Wiman's meditation was a clear example of Charles Taylor's notion that the experience of faith in a secular age is cross pressured by doubt and uncertainty in ways it was not several centuries earlier. Taylor's focus on the experience of faith helps him articulate why the secular does not mean religious beliefs are simply disappearing (as some secularization theorists would have it), but that the nature of religious belief is being shaped by their reaction to the secular. The argument of this project is that one of the primary ways in which religious belief—particularly Christianity—is being shaped by secularism is in the response and reaction against a key narrative of secularism: the myth of disenchantment.

In Wiman's poetry and prose we noticed a theological vision that attends closely to this life and this world, particularly in all the pain and suffering such embodiment brings. Wiman's theological vision does not seek to escape from such pain as otherworldly forms of Christianity might, nor does he grant the conclusions of materialists operating strictly within the immanent frame who see such pain and suffering as evidence of the *nihil* (or abyss) below the surface of the appearances. Rather, Wiman articulates a particular postsecular vision of a re-enchanted world that embraces human contingency in a world suffused with the mysterious, ongoing presence of a God who sustains and gives meaning to the creaturely world moment by moment.

In a similar vein, Robinson reacts against the modern, disenchanted world by attempting to recover the idea of the human soul—which, for her, is synonymous with inward experience or

consciousness—as the faculty that not only makes humans exceptional in the material world, but also firmly embeds them in the natural world, the theatre of God's glory. While Robinson moves towards a postsecular vision of reality and a new posture of attention and affection for particular, often neglected, landscapes—and in so doing, goes beyond even Wiman's ecological vision—her essays and fiction do not fully address just what this new perception of reality might entail for how we behave in the world, particularly when it comes to matters of land use and labor. For that, the writing of Wendell Berry is a helpful addition to this small group of contemporary American writers seeking a myth of re-enchantment.

Like Wiman and Robinson, Wendell Berry also writes against the modern, secular world and the myth of disenchantment that pervades it. Indeed, one of the key texts of Wendell Berry's corpus under focus in this chapter is *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition.* But before this essay, Berry's critiques of the modern world are many and well known and they most often deal with how the modern world has not only imagined the earth, but how its narrative about the world and humanity's relationship to it has led to disastrous abuses most acutely experienced by Berry in his home state of Kentucky. If any of the three writers in this project speak most directly to the malaise of the Anthropocene in terms of human abuses of the land, it is the Kentucky farmer, poet, essayist, and novelist, Wendell Berry.

In *The Unsettling of America*, an early collection of essays that placed Berry on the map as one of the most important agrarian voices in twentieth century America, Berry writes:

> The Modern World would respect the Creation only insofar as it could be *used* by humans. Henceforth, by definition, by principle, we would be unable to leave anything as it was. The usable would be used; the useless would be sacrificed in the use of something else. By means of the machine metaphor we have eliminated any fear or awe or reverence

> or humility or delight or joy that might have restrained us in our use of the world. We have indeed learned to act as if our sovereignty were unlimited and as if our intelligence were equal to the universe. Our "success" is a catastrophic demonstration of our failure. The industrial Paradise is a fantasy in the minds of the privileged and the powerful; the reality is a shambles.[389]

Although he does not use the term "disenchantment" here, Berry's reference to the "machine metaphor" is a metonymy for the mechanistic depiction of the cosmos that not only underwrites the myth of disenchantment, but also characterizes an Anthropocene in which this mechanistic narrative unleashed human control and power over-and-against the organic world. For the past half century Berry has repeatedly made the case that the present and ongoing destruction of the natural world is a consequence of such a reductionistic account of nature. Because of his reactions against this dominant narrative that undergirds secularism, I am framing Berry as a postsecular writer alongside Wiman and Robinson. However, for Berry this label poses a certain challenge.

Drawing on Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, John McClure notes that much of "postsecular" literature is marked by a "weakening confidence in secular-rational promises of peace and progress and the philosophical weakening of secular reason's claims to exclusive authority on matters of the real."[390] In the brief passage above one can already sense Berry's anger at how contemporary language and modern technologies and the attendant posture that desires objective knowledge wed to control, all collaborate to shape a destructive relationship to the natural world. These remove the awe and fear and reverence appropriate for the natural world

[389] Wendell Berry, "Living in the Future: The "Modern" Agricultural Ideal," *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977), 56.

[390] McClure, 11.

and replace them with a stance of disengaged control. We sense Berry's frustration in how the value of the earth is no longer understood to be intrinsic to it, but has, in the "Modern world," become *contingent* on human use and usefulness.

In making this remarkable shift, Berry argues, modern people have become almost god-like—or perceived themselves to be god-like—in their sovereign power over and against the world by means of utilitarian reason and the application of that reason to potent technologies and economic systems. Yet the industrialized paradises—the post-Enlightenment promised lands of "peace and progress"—created from this stance have often proven (particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) to be closer to something like hellscapes. Fantasies have become nightmares. Some of Berry's harshest critiques aimed at the heart of the ecological destruction all around him are levelled at those beholden by the myth of disenchantment, those who treat the earth "as a dead inert chemical mass."[391]

Berry's frustration at this reductionist understanding of the world creates what I argue is a particularly "postsecular" fascination with re-enchantment that underpins almost all of his ecological writing. In other words, I maintain that we do not get Berry's ecological vision outside of his broader postsecular theological vision. To be clear, Wiman is the only author in this study who seems to have seriously moved from a position of secular unbelief to Christianity that is quite distinct from the inherited, doctrinal, otherworldly Baptist theology of his youth. In this sense, Wiman's work is the most conscientiously postsecular. However, in the last chapter, I also noted that Robinson regards her own form of Christianity as a "weak form," and, thus, understands there to be a certain kinship in here work with other postsecular contemporaries like Toni Morrison or Don DeLillo. While Robinson's vision of reality that challenged secular norms

[391] Wendell Berry, "The Use of Energy," *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977), 90.

came from reading the Calvinist thought of Jonathan Edwards (among others), this recovery is still in reaction to and inflected by secularism. Wiman and Robinson do not, like other postsecular authors, offer new, hybridized forms of religion. However, their advocacy for a recovery of Christianity that focuses the importance of contingency for epistemology, the awe and reverence of humanity's shared ontology with all of reality, and a dynamic, mysterious world that is intrinsically significant and unfolding through time because of its ongoing relational status to a Creator, all make their distinctly Christian myths of re-enchantment postsecular *reactions* against the disenchanted, modern world. These reactions have challenged members both within and without modern manifestations of Christianity.

In an early collection of essays, *A Continuous Harmony,* Berry succinctly addresses the role that the secular plays in contemporary American nature poetry that is instructive for how one can read Berry's project as a postsecular offering. Talking about his non-Christian contemporaries, Berry speaks admiringly about their attention to the natural world from "a state of mind that could very accurately be described as religious."[392] Berry cautions that his use of this word might be seen derogatorily in a secular age, and he understands that it will be seen as primitive by many. But he means by this "religious" state of mind is an openness to the "sense of the presence of mystery or divinity in the world, or eve to the attitudes of wonder or awe or humility before the works of creation."[393]

This term mystery comes up in both Wiman and Robinson, but it is important to recall again that this is not simply a term that means an ambiguous unknown. While there is an element of uncertainty to it, all three authors in this project understand mystery as a fundamental aspect

[392] Wendell Berry, "A Secular Pilgrimage," *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 2.

[393] Ibid, 2 – 3.

of a world re-enchanted along Christian lines. Understood as such, the world is not simply charged with God's ongoing presence, but is to be understood sacramentally.

Theologian Hans Boersma's work on the sacramental imagination in the Christian tradition is helpful in unpacking just how mystery is tied to sacrament in Berry's writing. Boersma argues that "we would not go wrong by simply equating mystery and sacrament"[394] and that "reality truly is mysterious [in that] it carries a dimension that we are unable to fully express."[395] This is an idea explored in both Wiman and Robinson and, to be clear, Wiman was also not satisfied with any slippery use of mystery that simply relegates it to the unknown. For Wiman, the world's mystery was tied to its participation with its ontological source: God, the bright abyss behind all the appearances. For Wiman, our inability to fully speak for such a mysterious world was tied to our inability to grasp God through language.

In a similar vein, Boersma claims that it is the "*sacramental character* of reality that is the reason it so often appears mysterious and beyond human comprehension."[396] Of course, this does nothing to clarify the point yet. Boersma only acknowledges here that the belief that all of reality participates in the ongoingness of a living, dynamic God—who is eternal and beyond finite human comprehension—helps explain why our words and concepts and grasp on reality so often fall short of completion and certainty. The sacramental character of reality, according to Boersma, is the way in which material reality we sense and experience is not simply a sign pointing to some otherworld (akin to Platonic forms); rather, material reality "*participates in* the mysterious reality to which it points."[397] It is because of this participation that the Christian

[394] Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 22.
[395] Ibid
[396] Ibid
[397] Ibid, 23

visions of re-enchantment are not escapes from the world to some detached, idealized heaven, but nor are they prone to the reductive, nihilistic tendencies of pure materialism. It is through such a narrative that such renderings of Christianity challenge disenchantment but stay attentive to and affectionate for this material world.

Indeed, in the same essay from *A Continuous Harmony* I noted above, Berry goes on to articulate the religious state of mind he sees in contemporary American nature writing by quoting from John Steward Collis's *The Triumph of the Tree*, in which Berry offers a very clear picture of a postsecular reaction to disenchantment:

> Having become aware of objects and begun to name them, this Earliest Man became aware of something else. It is a remarkable fact that no sooner had he looked closely at the phenomena of nature than he began to concern himself with, not the visible object in front of him which he could clearly see, but the with an invisible object which he could not see at all. He looked at the trees, the rocks, the rivers, the animals, and having looked at them he at once began to talk about something in them which he had never seen and never heard of. This thing inside the objective appearance was called a god. […] his first thoughts seem to have turned towards a Thing behind the thing, a Force behind or within the appearance.[398]

It is important to note that this "religious state of mind" Berry sees in contemporary American nature writing is a recovery of "primitive" thought beholden to the myth of enchantment. However, Berry notes that in his own thinking, this "peculiar aspiration of contemporary nature poetry might be fairly accurately suggested by calling it a secular pilgrimage."[399] In a very telling passage about Berry's own affinity for these "secular" writers, he argues:

[398] Qtd in Berry, "A Secular Pilgrimage," 4.
[399] Ibid, 4.

> It is secular because it takes place outside of, or without reference to, the institutions of religion, and it does not seek any institutional shrine or holy place; it is in search of the world. But it is a pilgrimage nevertheless because it is a religious quest. It does not seek the world of inert materiality that is postulated by both 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."[400]

This small excerpt sums up Berry's vision of re-enchantment succinctly while also indicating the precarious position he (like Wiman and Robinson) occupies as a Christian writer concerned about nature in the secular age. Indeed, Berry identifies as a Christian and has quite publicly (as we will see) tried to make a sustained argument about the relationship between the Christian religion and how one should care for and belong to the created order. In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry notes:

> What relation do we see, if any, between body and mind, or body and soul? What connections or responsibilities do we maintain between our bodies and the earth? *These are religious questions*, obviously, for our bodies are part of the Creation, and they involve us in all the issues of mystery.[401]

Berry's call here to think about the ecological crisis as a religious problem bears closer attention in the secular age where, Charles Taylor argues, belief is always contested and contestable, even within a believing community.

In fact, Berry often reveals himself to be a very uneasy member of Christian communities. In his essays particularly, one often finds a voice deeply critical of certain groups

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[400] Ibid, 4 – 5.

[401] Wendell Berry, "The Body and the Earth," *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977), 97.

of Christians and their naïve (or willed) complicity with an industrialized mindset that would see forests razed and mountaintops removed all in the name of the "cultural mandate" ordering followers of God to have "dominion" over the creation.[402] Many Christians, according to Berry, have often conveniently, inexcusably wed Christian theology to a whole host of post-Enlightenment dualisms in a manner that has justified the exploitation and desecration of the complex ecology on which all life depends. In Charles Taylor's language, such Christians shaped by the conditions of the secular age, lean upon theologies of "excarnation"[403] that privilege abstract, disembodied, and immaterial truths rather than practical wisdom for material, embodied, creaturely life.

In some Christian writing, the "postsecular" reaction to the myth of disenchantment has been to articulate what I have been calling "this-worldly" theologies of re-enchantment. Theologian Ellen Davis, whose agrarian reading of the Bible was inspired by Berry's body of work, calls this a "modest materialism."[404] She calls the materialism of agrarians Like Berry "modest" because while he is "concern[ed] with the materiality of existence, [he] does not claim that what we humans can (or theoretically ever could) see or touch or make is exhaustive of what is, nor even that it constitutes the larger or more important part of what is."[405] To further clarify her point, Davis contrasts this modest materialism with "materialistic scientism" which is under the illusion and "magical thinking" that "science can solve all problems."[406] This form of materialism is a consequence of the disenchantment that Weber and Taylor note and is, Davis

[402] As partially noted in the opening chapter, this is from the Biblical passage of Genesis 1: 28 - 30 in which God blesses Adam and Eve after creating them, and then commands them to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (English Standard Version).

[403] *A Secular Age,* 293.

[404] Ellen Davis. *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 36.

[405] Ibid, 36 - 37.

[406] Ibid, 37.

continues, "strangely oblivious to what may be the most readily observable and nonnegotiable characteristic of our material world, namely finitude."[407] Berry's writing consistently tries to recover the *this*-worldly focus, the "modest materialism" aware of both human ignorance and material limits, within Christianity and, by doing so, articulate a "postsecular" Christian option that re-embeds[408] humans as integral participants of the world through attentive, careful, loving work.

In the following chapter, I will explore how Berry's writing and work are the culmination of a particular Christian form of postsecular re-enchantment in contemporary American letters. While there is overlap with both Robinson and Wiman's understanding of the world as sustained each moment by God's continued, creative presence, Berry also articulates from this a much more explicit ecological vision about how we practically live into this Christian myth of re-enchantment. Berry's writing has recycled numerous themes throughout the years so that what Owen Barfield once said of his friend C.S. Lewis, could equally be said of Berry: "What he thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything."[409] Within Berry's body of work is a remarkably consistent unity and coherence of thought. From his earliest writing, one finds the seeds that would germinate into more mature manifestations of his central ideas found in his other essay collections, his novels, and his poetry.

While Berry is well known as a champion of ecological conservation and local food, agrarianism and sustainability, all of these matters cannot be separated from the particular myth of re-enchantment that undergirds, and gives coherences to, almost everything he writes. Berry

[407] Ibid

[408] This is in particular reaction against the "great disembedding" Charles Taylor talks about as so fundamental to the secular age.

[409] Owen Barfield, preface in *The Taste of the Pineapple: Essays on C.S. Lewis as Reader, Critic, and Imaginative Writer*, ed. Bruce L. Edwards (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988), 2.

is, indeed, an ecological writer, but his particularly Christian vision is honed as a postsecular response to a disenchanted age. By understanding Berry's postsecular position a bit more clearly, we can turn to a closer reading of his novel *Jayber Crow*, in which, I maintain, Berry gives one of the most explicit expressions about how Christianity provides a way in which humans can understand themselves as ecological creatures.

Contra the Christians: Culture and Scripture

As I noted earlier in the first chapter, secularization has often entailed a "conflict" between religion and science, and thus engendered skepticism and distrust between both sides. Even though Taylor's account of the secular age articulates a desire for a more open secularism (one championed by Robinson as well), the conflicts endure. As was also noted, ecocritical thought has not been immune to this and has also often had a rather skeptical attitude towards religion, and Christianity in particular, when it comes to the treatment of the natural world.

Recall Lynn White Jr., in his seminal 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," arguing that the Christian heritage bears a large "burden of guilt" for fostering attitudes that encourage ecological degradation.[410] Yet despite this, White never really endorsed a full-scale rejection of Christianity. Rather, and here lies the challenge, White proposed a "rethinking of Christian axioms."[411] "What people do about their ecology," White wrote, "depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion."[412] White did not advocate the rejection of Christianity *per se*, a point that can be often forgotten,

[410] Lynn White Jr., 1207
[411] Ibid, 1207.
[412] Ibid., 1204.

but a possible revaluation of it. He concluded that essay with these words: "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."[413] White's disillusionment with various manifestations of Christianity yet his perduring optimism that it also *might* contain the resources to get us beyond such problematic theologies parallels, in many ways, Berry's own troubled relationship to the dualistic Christianity of his Protestant Kentucky upbringing, one that advocated primarily for a life *beyond* this life and, in so doing, denigrated the material world.

In "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" Berry makes a bold assertion: recovering the Christian tradition is fundamental to the preservation of creation. "Our native religion," by which Berry means here Christianity,[414] "should survive and renew itself so that it may become as largely and truly instructive as we need it to be. On such a survival and renewal of the Christian religion may depend the survival of the Creation that is its subject."[415] I will address the problems Berry has with his "native religion" of Christianity in just a moment, but it is important to understand why and how Berry seeks such a recovery project in the first place. For Berry it has to do with belonging to a place that includes not just the flora and fauna, but also the people and their traditions, beliefs, and practices. In *Life is a Miracle*, Berry argues that we must remember our tradition as a way of living into Ezra Pound's modernist dictum to "make it new!" This was not to abolish the past, but to make it live in the present: "The new must come from the

[413] Ibid

[414] There are obviously some problematic assumptions here made by Berry's use of "our" and "native religion" that exclude the indigenous religions that precede Berry's "imported" Christianity. However, in the context of Berry's original pre-published address, this was delivered to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. My gratitude to Chad Wriglesworth for pointing this detail out and noting that before publication "dislocated" this talk, it was delivered in a particular place to particular people. Those people being, particularly, natives of the Christian faith and not, obviously, to Kentucky.

[415] Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation*," Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 95.

old, for where else would you get it?"[416] In an essay titled "Poetry and Marriage," Berry qualifies this further, noting that any remembering of the past will not simply be blind acceptance or rosy-eyed nostalgia; rather, remembering one's traditions will necessarily involve "judg[ing] and correct[ing]" it.[417] This is an active form of remembering. Ellen Davis argues that it is for this reason that Berry's writing functions like that of the Old Testament Prophets who were originally referred to as "seers."[418] Davis notes that their ability to see requires a memory that "recall[s] the beloved community to itself" by "looking backward, noting both failures and successes, so as to imagine new possibilities better than those offered by the dominant culture of the age."[419]

Berry's interest in *his* "native tradition" of Christianity is not to exclude the value he finds in other religious traditions. In his decades long correspondence with fellow poet and friend Gary Snyder, Berry's interest and disagreements with Buddhism and Indigenous religions are quite apparent.[420] However, Berry's desire to recover Christianity is connected to his deep concern for handing over a tradition to a new generation who should not only be members of the land of their birth, but also members of the community and tradition that precede them. For Berry, this means that to live in Kentucky in the twentieth century (and presumably 21st) is not simply to understand the agrarian legacy of the Kentucky farm community, but also to understand the literature, philosophy, and religion of the West. In contemplating his *Sabbath Poems*—poems Berry wrote on Sundays often in lieu of attending formal, religious services—Berry wrote to Snyder:

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[416] Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (New York: Counterpoint, 2001), 71.

[417] Wendell Berry, "Poetry and Marriage," *Standing By Words: Essays* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 102.

[418] *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture,* 10.

[419] Ibid, 16 – 17.

[420] For more on this see: *Distant Neighbors: The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder*, ed. Chad Wriglesworth (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2014).

> These poems are the result, partly, of a whole pattern of dissatisfactions: with my time and history, with my work, with my grasp of problems, with such solutions as I have found, with the traditions both of poetry and religion that the poems attempt to use and serve. That last dissatisfaction is the cause of all the immediate difficulties. There the traditions are, inextricably braided together, very beautiful in certain manifestations, but broken off, cheapened, weakened, encrusted with hateful growths — yet so rich, so full of the suggestion of usefulness and beauty, that I finally can't resist the impulse to try to lay hold of them.[421]

Christianity, for Berry, is interwoven in the traditions of historical, philosophical, and literary knowledge that transform space into a place, but even more than this, transform a place into the home to which one might belong. This is why Berry's writing explores close readings of *The Odyssey* and Virgil's *Georgics* as well as ruminations on *King Lear* and, of course, close exegesis of the Christian Scriptures.[422] Kimberly Smith argues that it is Berry's "goal to revive and renew the intellectual tradition that he has inherited."[423] Dominic Manganiello even goes so far as to suggest that Berry's particular reliance on intertextuality in his writing is a way in which he shows how interdependent humans are as creatures; no one is self-sufficient and we all, to some degree, rely on our memories passed on by the great community of the dead.[424] When a community remembers, according to Berry, it is part of the way in which they become

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[421] I credit, and thank, Chad Wriglesworth for pointing me to this particular passage. See *Distant Neighbors,* 57.

[422] Although written late in his career and, in part, due to reaction of Berry's oversight's in what parts of the "tradition" are remembered, Berry has also explored some of the worst aspects of this tradition that many want to forget. For his treatment of slavery and Christian complicity in this, see *The Hidden Wound* (1970).,2nd ed. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010).

[423] Kimberly Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 6.

[424] Dominic Manganiello, "Dante and Wendell Berry's Modern Book of Memory," *Memory and Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 115.

meaningful participants and members of their homeland. It is a counter-cultural way of becoming re-embedded in society, particularly in a secular age that eschews such traditions and champions an autonomous, detached self, one shorn of myths and metanarratives. Throughout his writing Berry continually engages the challenge to "rethink" Christianity along these lines, as a religion that possesses profound truths about the proper relationship between humankind as integral participants in a material world that precedes and proceeds humans.

Berry also seeks the insights of Christianity because he maintains, in a decidedly postsecular way, that Christianity has the resources to challenge current, secular renderings of the "real" that are inadequate and unhealthy:

> Right at the heart of the religious impulse there seems to be a certain solicitude for reality: the fear of foreclosing it or of reducing it to some merely human estimate. […] As inhabitants of the modern world, we are religious now perhaps to the extent of our desire to crack open the coffin of materialism, and to give to reality a larger, freer definition than is allowed by the militant materialists of the corporate economy and their political servants or by the mechanical paradigm of reductive science.[425]

Such reductive materialisms, wherein "we think of ourselves as merely biological creatures, whose story is determined by genetics or environment"[426] are a consequence of the myth of disenchantment and provide no framework for a true responsibility or impetus to caring affection. Conversely, though, a Christianity that is beholden to a theology of excarnation, in which "we think of ourselves as lofty souls trapped temporarily in lowly bodies"[427] is equally problematic.

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[425] Wendell Berry, "The Burden of the Gospels," *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 132 – 133.

[426] "Christianity and Survival," 109.

[427] Ibid

To better understand Berry's recovery project, it helps to know just what Berry believes American Christianity needs to be recovered *from*, which I have already hinted at in the preceding paragraphs. This not only helps to contextualize Berry's postsecular unease within certain forms of popular Christianity, but how the myth of disenchantment cuts across both religious and non-religious communities. This is not simply a matter of faith versus reason, or religion versus science, but a matter of recovering a healthy love for this world that utilizes both while challenging both. In his writing, Berry has often lamented how "organized Christianity seems to have made peace with 'the economy'" and that "the church has lately shown little inclination to honor the earth."[428] Berry asserts 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"[429] and that "most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economics as are most industrial organizations. The certified Christian seems just as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder Creation."[430] American forms of Christianity, in Berry's analysis, have not been passively complicit, but in some cases have actively promoted the abuse of the Creation through their false teachings about the world and man's relationship to it.

In regard to the American theological and literary tradition in particular, Jeffrey Bilbro helpfully explores what he calls "the problematic roots of Puritan dualism."[431] Bilbro is, of course, drawing on the well-worn narrative developed, most notably, by Perry Miller in *Errand*

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[428] Wendell Berry, "God and Country," *What are People For?: Essays* (New York: North Point Publishing, 1990), 96.

[429] "Christianity and Survival," 96.

[430] Ibid

[431] Jeffrey Bilbro, *Loving God's Wildness: The Christian Roots of Ecological Ethics in American Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 2.

into the Wilderness, in which nature for the early settlers was rendered a place hostile to human activity and a haunt for the devil.[432] One can hear Berry addressing these problematic roots in "A Native Hill," where he notes his wariness about the Christian religion in America that has "promoted and fed upon a destructive schism between body and soul, Heaven and earth. [One that has] encouraged people to believe that the world is of no importance, and that their only obligation is to submit to certain churchly formulas in order to get to Heaven."[433] Berry goes on to frame this as a particularly Christian form of disenchantment, found in post-Enlightenment Deistic rationalism: "Once the creator was removed from the creation, divinity became only a remote abstraction, a social weapon in the hands of the religious institutions. […] While pursuing Heaven with the sublime appetite he thought of as his soul, [humanity] could turn his heart against his neighbors and his hands against the world."[434]

However, Bilbro (and Miller's) account of the Puritans is much too simplistic, particularly given the work that Marilynne Robinson has done to unsettle such common assumptions. The dualism that Berry challenges is a hallmark of Western thought since at least the Greeks and is manifest in a variety of idealistic philosophies and theologies. [435]

Charles Taylor is helpful in tracing a more complex reading of the Puritans that places their thought in a longer historical, theological trajectory. For my particular interests, the Puritan moment that shaped so much American ecological and theological thought occurs

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[432] Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956).

[433] Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill," *The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 22 – 23.

[434] Ibid, 23.

[435] Joel Shuman, co-editor of *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, explains that Berry's critiques of Christianity and the Church are often directed at Christians who have adopted excarnational, Gnostic tendencies and are thus "insufficiently attentive to the earth and flesh." Berry's criticism of the church, then, is not so much an attack on Christian teaching, as it is a critique of the Gnostic elements that are a particular manifestation of the secular condition that has shaped aspects of Christian theology. See: Joel J. Shuman, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), 2.

simultaneously with what Charles Taylor calls the rise of "Providential Deism" that brought about a great "anthropocentric shift."[436] This is a more compelling take on the Puritans than Bilbro and Miller's, and one that better explains the gnostic tendencies in contemporary forms of American evangelical Christianity. As God was removed from the inner working of nature, "religion in this era became more focused on humans."[437] Taylor remarks that the anthropocentric shift this entailed—the very one Lynn White Jr. notes in his essay—is a reordering of religious priorities away from glorifying God and participating in Him and His created world and towards more immanentized, "secular" forms of happiness.[438] The Puritan settlers looked on the new world as a new wilderness in which they might make a heaven of hell. The problem here is that this is only to enchant one side of the equation: the human. The human, in this light, is the *imago dei*, capable of creating culture from a nature that was spoken into existence but no longer attended to or sustained by God. Such a world is not a sacrament of the greater reality (a participant in it), but only a mere set of symbols that point to the reality beyond it.

What Bilbro and Miller miss in their reading is precisely why this anthropocentric shift is much more complex than simple dualisms. Indeed, the Deistic theology of post-seventeenth century thought catalyzed a capitalistic mindset that perceived the American wilderness as nothing more than a standing reserve of commodities. Transforming the world into commodities was not only good economics, but sound theology. Berry's thought offers no simple rejection of this, but an important nuance: the re-enchantment of non-human nature. Not only are humans exceptional (as Robinson showed us), but they are so as participants in the mysterious Reality

[436] *A Secular Age*, 222.
[437] *Loving God's Wildness,* 3.
[438] *A Secular Age,* 242.

shared by all creatures. Indeed, Berry's writing is not against using the world or even working it and cultivating it. Rather, it is a call to a peculiar kind of work that does not forget that the root word of economics and ecology is *oikos*, the household. All human action and work must attend to keeping this earth a healthy home for humans, now and in future generations.

Bilbro notes that this dualism led to a rather "schizophrenic" treatment of nature all throughout American history to the present day.[439] Again, I would say the schizophrenia is because in certain strains of Puritanism it only saw one side of the human-nature relationship as enchanted. When we turn to a closer look at Berry's ecological and theological vision, however, we find one way in which the tension between the gnostic dualisms he is still critiquing in the late twentieth century might be overcome, and this is precisely in the form a distinctly Christian, postsecular re-enchantment.[440]

While Berry might seem to distance himself from the church in his writing, his desire is to create a holistic vision of the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the earth that takes the church's historical teachings seriously. For Berry, this vision can be found *within*, not without, the Scripture Christians believe to be authoritative. In fact, the problems that Lynn White Jr. exposed in certain understandings of Scripture do not reveal a problem with Scripture as much as they reveal a problem with an ability to interpret Scripture properly. In his Foreword to *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, Berry remarks that there is a "falsehood in the idea that our ecological destructiveness is permitted, even instructed,

[439] Ibid, 9.

[440] Berry does draw on other aspects of the American literary and religious tradition, such as the Transcendentalists and Southern Agrarians, to support his vision.

in the Bible. Berry argues that this is a misunderstanding and misuse of the Bible. The fault, clearly, is in the way the Bible has been *applied.*"[441]

One of Lynn White Jr.'s main contentions with the Christian heritage is that its adherents believed they were to conquer, subdue and have dominion over the world. These contentions are largely based upon a certain interpretation of the cultural mandate found in Genesis 1:28. However, in "God and Country" Berry suggests that "many are guilty of an extremely unintelligent misreading"[442] of this very passage. The fact that both Christian and non-Christian thinkers have pointed to the cultural mandate as one culprit behind humanity's unrestrained abuse of the natural world gives credence to Berry's claim that the Bible can be "used fragmentarily to justify several kinds of meanness."[443] "The evangelist," Berry warns, "has walked beside the conqueror and the merchant, too often blandly assuming that their causes were the same."[444]

Berry offers two pieces of advice for those who misuse Scripture in such a way and, thus, miss what a religious rendering of the world might offer a secular age beholden to the myth of disenchantment. For the irreligious who cherry-pick passages of Scripture to criticize, Berry suggests that they "have not mastered the first rule of the criticism of books: you have to read them before you criticize them."[445] However, for the Christian, Berry says, there must be a "long work of true criticism" where we "learn to read and understand the Bible in the light of the present fact of Creation."[446] Again, note that Berry's postsecular voice cuts both ways, both

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[441] Wendell Berry, "Foreword," *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), x.

[442] Wendell Berry, "God and Country," *What are People For? Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 98.

[443] "Foreword," x.

[444] "Christianity and Survival," 98.

[445] "Ibid, 99.

[446] Ibid

against the irreligious who are suspicious of Christianity and the religious who naively accept a distorted version of Christianity.

In the "Foreword" to Ellen Davis' agrarian reading of the Bible, Berry lays out a conceptual framework that one will need if they are to turn seriously to the Bible and Christian tradition as a source which has something to say about humanity's relationship to the earth; he writes: "[T]he Bible is not a book only about 'spirituality' or getting to Heaven, but is 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."[447] Note Berry's "this-worldly" theology—or "modest materialism"—in which theology is never divorced from real world application, abstract thought never severed from practice. Here again Berry avoids anthropocentric inclinations by denying that humanity is the sole focus of Scripture while the created world is only of marginal importance. Berry also does not simply flip the dichotomy by making humankind peripheral to the creation; rather, he suggests that humanity and creation are inextricably linked to each other in a complex ecological and symbiotic relationship. What Scripture gives us when we look at it holistically, Berry continues, is "a story and a discourse about the connection of a people to a place. This connection is at once urgently religious and urgently practical."[448] As we will notice in Berry's fictional world of *Jayber Crow*, Christianity provides one way to reenchant the world in a secular age and one framework for articulating how humans might understand themselves to be *embedded* participants in the world's mysterious, given life rather than those whose stance to the world is marked by control and mastery.

Yet the Bible's call to mastery over the world bears further attention. Berry argues that a proper understanding of the call to be *stewards* who exercise dominion and mastery over the

[447] "Foreword," ix.
[448] "God and Country," 97.

creation implies, at base, that the created world is something inherently good and given. As a steward, humanity is not the source of the world's goodness, but only charged with caring for it in a way that is *responsible*. As we saw with Wiman, such language is loaded. We respond not only to the communicative reality of non-human things, but also, Berry suggests, to the source who first communicated them into existence.

Berry acknowledges that the earth's goodness needs to be the starting point for any good Christian ecological thinking, but this goodness again is not an anthropocentric construction. The earth is not good, Berry notes, because humans deem it to be. Rather, in the Christian framework from which Berry operates, the earth's goodness is part of its relationship to its Creator:

> The ecological teaching of the Bible is simply inescapable: God made the world because He wanted it made. He thinks the world is good, and He loves it. It is His world; He has never relinquished title to it. And He has never revoked the conditions, bearing on His gift to us of the use of it that oblige us to take excellent care of it. If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or justified in destroying it?[449]

Because the concept of God and his declaration that the earth is "good" transcends any human construction of goodness, human responsibility to the world in this framing is a participation in a relationship between God and the world that precedes *and* includes humans. Ellen Davis provides unique insight into a "this-worldly" theology that makes sense of the cultural mandate in a secular age of contested belief in her chapter "Seeing with God: Israel's Poem of Creation." Davis translates the mandate from the original Hebrew as follows: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and *conquer it* and *exercise mastery* among the fish of the sea and among the birds of

[449] "God and Country," 98.

the sky and among every animal that creeps on the earth."[450] Davis points out that the translation of "mastery" rather than "dominion" is more accurate since the Hebrew verb is "not 'to rule'; the word actually denotes the travelling around of the shepherd with his flock. Thus, the language of Genesis 1 acknowledges the unique power of *Homo sapiens*, yet without separating us from the other creatures."[451] The ecological crisis, Davis argues as preface to her study, is ultimately a moral problem facing humans before it is anything else. Yet it only becomes moral if we understand ourselves to be *apart from* and *a part of* the natural world: humans are indeed composed of the same stuff as the soil, but they are also unlike any other thing in having a freedom and capacity to act creatively or destructively.[452]

In addition, this cultural mandate does not give primacy to humankind as the focal point of the Creator-Creature-Creation dynamic. Drawing upon a Medieval understanding of the cosmos as something harmoniously ordered, Davis points out that "[t]he earth and God are both centers, and the axis connecting them is the Chain of Being."[453] Humanity, therefore, must observe their calling "to master" the world in a way that conforms to the patterns of the ordered creation of which we are a part. In Berry's fiction, as we will see, this ordered cosmos of the Medieval (premodern) imagination continues to animate his vision of re-enchantment

Contra the Materialists: Science and Wonder

Berry's most articulate critique of the myth of disenchantment comes in his collection *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (2000). Written as an extended review (and critique) of E.O. Wilson's *Consilience*, Berry's essays extend themes he had already begun

[450] *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture,* 54.
[451] Ibid, 55.
[452] Ibid, 9.
[453] Ibid, 57.

to explore in *The Unsettling of America* several decades earlier. The importance of this collection, for my purposes, is first that it precedes the publication of *Jayber Crow* (2001) by only one year and thus proves helpful in illuminating what ideas and themes Berry was wrestling with while also working through them in fiction. Second, this collection provides Berry's most explicit treatment of what a post-Enlightenment disenchantment has meant for how we imagine the world and, consequently, our place in it. Berry provides a Christian postsecular option for re-enchantment. And it helps to see how Berry does so in opposition to a dominant form of post-Enlightenment thought that continues to pit religion *against* science, faith against reason. By trusting so completely in the powers of human reason, Berry warns, we not only elevate humanity in dangerous ways, but denigrate the material world by forgetting that the world's complexity will always elude our understanding and its life (in which we participate) is of the utmost mysteries that should humble us.

From the title of the collection, Berry indicates that the Modern world in all its supposed enlightenment is still subject to superstition. Like Adorno, Horkheimer, Midgley, and Taylor,[454] Berry refuses to see the Enlightened as living in some mythless, or irreligious realm. While religion and mythology are not synonymous, as overarching narratives that help us make sense of who we are and our place in the world there is important overlap. Therefore Berry's fear is apt when he notes: "Whatever proposes to invalidate or abolish religion (and this is what consilience pretty openly proposes) is in fact attempting to put itself in religion's place."[455] The peculiarly modern superstition of E.O. Wilson is this faith in the omnicompetence of the scientific method and the optimism that this knowledge, applied to new technologies will save us from the

[454] See Chapter One for how they render the Enlightenment as bound by myths. Taylor will call these "takes" on the world that they "spin" as being "the way things are" rather than human constructions.

[455] *Life is a Miracle,* 99.

drudgery of creaturely limits. Yet Berry, in a passage that sounds reminiscent of Weber's discussion of disenchantment, warns that "Science can function as religion only by making two unscientific claims: that it will eventually know everything, and that it will eventually solve all human problems."[456]

As he often does, Berry relies on the historical tradition of Western literature and thought to counter Wilson. He begins his essay by unpacking several lines from Shakespeare's *King Lear*. What fascinates Berry is the character of Gloucester, the old earl "who, like Lear, is guilty of hubris or presumption, of treating life as knowable, predictable, and within his control."[457] In Berry's rather strategic reading, Gloucester becomes a stand-in for the disenchanted man. Gloucester is, fittingly, blinded and unknowingly led by his exiled son, Edgar, to a cliff top where he renounces his life and seeks to bring about its end. Unable to see that the drop his son led him to is only a few feet, Gloucester survives his attempted suicide, recovers, and finds Edgar his son at hand. Edgar, revealing himself to his father, says "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again."[458] Berry uses this text as a jumping off point to explore how humans "can give up on life by presuming to 'understand' it—that is by reducing it to the terms of our understanding and treating it as predictable or mechanical."[459] Gloucester as embodiment of the disenchanted man, Berry argues, reveals to us a destructive death drive under our pretenses of control and domination and absolute knowledge. In "The Way of Ignorance," an essay written several years later, Berry develops this theme further, reacting against Richard Dawkins's assertion that "our brains are big enough to see into the future and plot long-term consequences." Berry argues that this post-Enlightenment attitude is "a superstition of the most primitive sort. We recognize it also

[456] Ibid
[457] Ibid, 4.
[458] Berry references *King Lear* (IV. vi, 55).
[459] *Life is a Miracle,* 6.

as our old friend hubris, ungodly ignorance disguised as godly arrogance."[460] In a sly way, Berry has turned the tables on Francis Bacon, one of E.O. Wilson's Enlightenment heroes. The idols of the theater that inhibited serious thinking turn out, according to Berry, merely to be another form of idols. There is superstition all the way down. But rather than try to claim access to some objective, universal truth as other Christian reactionaries do.[461] Berry goes another direction, one that we have seen Wiman traverse: the way of ignorance.

While Berry promotes a certain "way of ignorance," he is clear to note that the particularly "modern" forms of ignorance—ones that have proven so destructive in the Anthropocene—are deeply indebted to the post-Enlightenment myth of disenchantment:

> There are several kinds of ignorance that are not inherent in our nature but come instead from weakness of character. Paramount among these is the willful ignorance that refuses to honor as knowledge anything not subject to empirical proof. We could just as well call it materialist ignorance. This ignorance rejects useful knowledge such as traditions of imagination and religion, and so it comes across as narrow-mindedness. We have the materialist culture that afflicts us now because a world exclusively material is the kind of world most readily used and abused by the kind of mind the materialists think they have. To this kind of mind, there is no longer a legitimate wonder. Wonder has been replaced by a research agenda, which is still a world away from demonstrating the impropriety of wonder.[462]

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[460] Wendell Berry, "The Way of Ignorance," *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004), 53.

[461] Such projects are very common in contemporary American Christianity that is prone to apologetic stances that combat objectivist claims of science with objectivist claims of religion. See, for instance: Nancy Pearcy, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

[462] Ibid, 54 – 55.

The "arrogant ignorance" Berry refers to here aligns with the various aspects of the "myth of disenchantment" unpacked in the first chapter. Such arrogant boasts about our power to "know" are limited to what can be known to human senses and reason and the parts of the world that are quantifiable. In such a narrative, religion and imagination are relegated to the margins.

"To treat life as mechanical or predictable or understandable," Berry argues, "is to reduce it."[463] On the surface, this sounds rather absurd: a lot of good has indeed come from treating life in this way. Understanding genetics to diets to animals as "systems" that are both understandable (within limits, of course) and largely predictable is a rather important accomplishment and treating the earth this way has not merely reduced it, but amplified it.[464] The rhetoric here reveals a problem, noted by critics, in how often Berry's thinking creates two (rather reductive) extremes that usually rely on unhelpful caricature. For example, in multiple places Berry (drawing on the thought of his teacher Wallace Stegner) classifies all Americans as either "Boomers" or "Stickers."[465] Alan Jacobs criticizes Berry's "binary code," arguing "it's useless—it's worse than useless—it's simplistic and uncharitable."[466] In a similar fashion, Berry's "binary code" of the arrogance of modern "superstitious" science versus the religious "way of ignorance" might also seem reductive, useless, simplistic, and even uncharitable. Jeffrey Bilbro explains this rather frustrating aspect in Berry's writing, arguing that his "binaries are a rhetorical form that can prophetically pry open the too narrow codes in which we buffer ourselves from complex

[463] *Life is a Miracle,* 7.

[464] Or, to use both a Biblical and scientific term, it has "magnified" it.

[465] Berry writes: Stegner thought rightly that we American, by inclination at least, have been divided into two kinds: "boomers" and "stickers." Boomers, he said, are "those who pillage and run," who want "to make a killing and end up on Easy Street," whereas stickers are "those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in." For more on this, see Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection*: *The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 10.

[466] Alan Jacobs, "On Stickers and Boomers," *American Conservative* (2013): www.theamericnaconservative.com/jacobs/on-stickers-and-boomers/.

reality."[467] In other words, by making such stark contrasts, Berry is not ignoring the particulars—in fact, Berry's call for loving care in the world is precisely to be attentive to particulars—but rather Berry is helping us to see clearly what is at stake with the assumptions that undergird a disenchanted mythology.

If we take Bilbro's reading of Berry's binaries seriously, the arguably caricatured materialist scientist remains instructive as a "type" that might take on various manifestations in the modern world, yet no matter the particular nuances of their character, they remain beholden to the myth of disenchantment, which for Berry will eventually lead to a destructive stance against the world. In his early career, even Berry has admitted that he was not immune from the pull of these cultural forces. In many ways, he was the "boomer" chasing career opportunities in New York and abroad. While he was achieving success by modern standards, Berry also realized he was becoming placeless, the type of buffered, modern man that is home everywhere and nowhere.[468]

For Berry, achieving a home in the world starts at the level of perception and moves to the very things we create. "We treat people, places, and things," Berry warns, "in accordance with the way we perceive them."[469] And Berry's biggest fear is that the modern world's perceptions are often filtered by the myth disenchantment:

> The reclassification of the world from *creature to machine* must involve at least a perilous reduction of moral complexity. So must the shift in our attitude toward the creation from reverence to understanding. So much the shift in our perceived relationship

[467] Jeffrey Bilbro, "Humility," *Virtues of Renewal: Wendell Berry's Sustainable Forms* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2019), 75.

[468] Berry tells this story in multiple essays but see both "The Long-Legged House" and "A Native Hill" in *The Long-Legged House: Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 20102).

[469] *Life is a Miracle,* 88.

to nature from that of steward to that of absolute owner, manager, and engineer. So even must our permutation of "holy" to "holistic."[470]

The ecological dimensions to this are apparent: "The widespread belief that creatures are machines obviously makes it difficult to form an advocacy for creatures against machines."[471]

For Berry, the ecological moral failure of the Anthropocene is embedded in a whole way of life—a "myth we live by"—that shapes perceptions, informs language, and ultimately circumscribes practices and cultural artefacts. In postwar, industrialized America, Berry realizes how deeply embedded the "modern superstition" has become in the American way of life. Berry calls this "not 'science' but 'science-technology-and-industry'."[472] It is the full manifestation of the Anthropocene. For Berry, these three have combined in Western culture in a potent concoction that often alienates humans from nature and one another: "Science-technology-and-industry has enabled us to be precise (apparently) in describing objects that are extremely small and near or extremely large and far away. It has failed utterly to provide us with even adequate descriptions of the places and communities we live in—probably because it cannot do so."[473] And it cannot do so, he suggests, because the very nature of science is its reliance upon "abstraction," the "tendency to allow the particular to be absorbed or obscured by the general. […] Having been classified, dissected, and explained, the creature has disappeared into its class, anatomy, and explanation."[474] This is not a fault of science *per se*, but the danger comes when scientific truths becomes "the hard cash of the modern economy"[475] and we forget that the very

[470] Ibid, 8.
[471] Ibid, 54.
[472] Ibid, 33.
[473] Ibid, 35.
[474] Ibid, 39.
[475] Ibid, 18.

mysterious miracle of life that supersedes scientific knowledge is the heart of the *oikos*, the household around which all economic and ecological thought depends.

On the surface, *Life is a Miracle* seems to make Berry just another proponent of the conflict between religion and science. But in Berry's essay he is clear that he is "not of course proposing an end to science and other intellectual disciplines but rather a change of standards and goals."[476] Berry argues that the standards for human behaviour (particularly in terms of how we use the natural world) must come "not from the capability of technology, but from the nature of places and communities. We must shift the priority from production to local adaptation, from innovation to familiairity, from power to elegance, from costliness to thrift."[477] This actually addresses his notion of work that contrasted that of the early American settlers. To see nature as a standing reserve of commodities reduces the world and degrades work and opens it up to the desecration of nature, turning it into a place hostile to human dwelling. But if people work in ways that desire to see the world become a home, such a change might, Berry concludes, "make our work an answer to despair."[478]

Berry's call to caring, local work does not simply focus on human exceptionalism without addressing the nature of the material world of which they are apart. To do this is to allow a theological vision that champions work but destroys the very life of this world. Therefore, Berry's distinct call to work is intimately associated with his postsecular, Christian vision of a material world that is "mysterious" along the sacramental lines noted above. Re-enchanting reality in such a way is what, for Berry, properly frames human work in the world. It does not negate it but gives it the context in which it becomes home-making work. In *Life is a Miracle*,

[476] Ibid, 12.
[477] Ibid
[478] Ibid

Berry starts to tease out some of the ways in which the world might be reimagined in ways that challenge post-Enlightenment reductions. In a passage reminiscent of writing by both Wiman and Robinson, Berry claims that reality is never something that our science will fully understand; rather, reality is always characterized by a *more*-ness and plenitude. It always eludes a human's intellectual understanding, control, and language:

> When I try to make my language more particular, I see that the life of the place is always emerging beyond expectation or prediction or typicality, that it is unique, given to the world minute by minute, only once, never to be repeated. And then is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving.[479]

Berry is not denying the power or significance of science; rather, he is attempting to reframe it within the boundaries of a religious discourse that, he believes, more satisfactorily accounts for mystery and ignorance and, thus, might lend itself to a posture of humility and restraint. "Religious faith," Berry argues, "is a way of knowing things that cannot otherwise be known."[480] The way beyond the conflict, Berry argues, is when "Religion [does] not attempt to dispute what science has actually proved; and science [does] not claim to know what it does not know."[481]

To be sure, Berry is under no illusion that, in the secular age, his vision of the world will be accepted or remain uncontested, particularly his desire to see more openness to religion and imagination. Nevertheless, he offers a version of re-enchantment deeply indebted to a "biblical religion that is explicitly against reductionism."[482] What Berry means here by reductionism is a world shorn of mystery, a world in which God is either non-existent (a secular materialist claim) or detached (Deistic, gnostic claim). Berry's vision keeps the possibility that all flesh lives by the

[479] *Life is a Miracle,* 45.
[480] Ibid, 28.
[481] Ibid, 98.
[482] Ibid, 101.

spirit and breath of God (Job 34:14-15). We 'live, and move, and have our being' in God (Acts 17:28)."[483]

According to Berry science can never prove, unequivocally, this mysterious dimension to reality. It must be believed and held on to as a narrative—or myth—that can helps us work in the world and, thus, make it a home. In "Health is Membership," Berry clarifies that it is through such a narrative that our home-making work receives its ultimate model. In this myth of re-enchantment, God is not some Deistic form of energy, but rather he attends to the world with a deeply felt affection and love and, thus, all human work is an invitation to participate in this ongoing work:

> I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.[484]

Berry's fictional narrator, Jayber Crow, will have a vision of the world that echoes this sentiment, and it precedes his entrance into an ecological way of life and work. Indeed, Berry's repeated call to do good, healing work in the earth is almost always connected to his bigger vision of a reenchanted cosmos that is created and sustained by a loving God. For Berry, one can obviously have one (good work) without the other (perception of the world as God's good creation). Indeed, Berry has even noted that "whether we consider it from a religious point of view or from the point of view of our merely practical wish to continue to live, we cannot exempt use from care."[485] And to recover a way of living that is defined by care, Berry argues,

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[483] Ibid

[484] "Health is Membership," 89.

[485] "The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity," *Another Turn of the Crank: Essays* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 74.

would be to "reclaim and revalidate the ground of our moral and religious tradition" since "what we have traditionally called 'sins' are wrong not because they are forbidden but because they divide us from our neighbours, from the world, and ultimately from God."[486] Berry's hope is that by recovering a this-worldly theological vision of re-enchantment, he both works within his native religious tradition and offers a compelling vision of a healthy relationship to the world that might intrigue or challenge or haunt atheistic materialists as well as gnostic Christians. And it is precisely in this precarious "middle" position between belief and unbelief that marks postsecular protagonists like Jayber Crow.

Jayber Crow: Making a Home in the World

Jayber Crow is a story told as a first-person perspective through Jayber's eyes. He is an old man at the time of the telling and the novel is written as a series of memories about his past. Wendell Berry employs such narrative voices often in his fiction and it allows him to show how significant remembering is for membership, which is the key to both Berry's ecological and theological vision. Understanding that we are not detached or alienated— "disembedded" to use Taylor's term—from the world helps one perceive the world as a home (*oikos*) and, in turn, undertake the good work of making it a home. However, as good as this home might be, Berry also wants us to understand that the home is broken, marred by the moral evil of individuals and structures that will turn the garden into a wasteland. For this reason, even the person fortunate enough to find a membership in this world will always only be a pilgrim, passing through.

Berry's own life is a testament to this desire for, what he calls, "convocation," which is both the fact and the process of becoming a member, held together by bonds of affection that are

[486] Ibid

at once "religious, ecological, and communal."[487] In "The Long-Legged House, one of Berry's earliest essays,"[488] he traces his own "home coming" to Port Royal Kentucky after a successful university career launched him into a mobile life that brought him and his wife Tanya to New York City and Europe for teaching and writing work. In many ways, Berry had "made it" but only at the cost of severing him from the various dependencies he had to his native land, people, and religion. By returning to his native land, Berry not only answered a call he felt in his life, but became the type of regional writer who is an active participant rather than a detached observer.

In a similar fashion, the form that Jayber Crow's life takes is ultimately that of a pilgrim's homecoming. Jayber begins his journey wandering, homeless and placeless, but in the course of his life he learns how to dwell ecologically, becoming an integral part of a membership tied to land and community and loving, careful work.

Jayber's original name is Jonah, an allusion to the Biblical prophet who, as the story goes, refuses to obey God's order to bring a warning to Nineveh. Rather than go, Jonah runs away from home and from God. In the novel, Jonah Crow loses both of his parents and is taken in by a neighbour couple who also eventually die while Jonah is young. After being sent to "The Good Shepherd," an orphanage marked by the severing of the most basic natural familial bonds, the superintendent remarks: "Mr. Crow, since I believe you have not yet found your way to Nineveh, I will call you J."[489] "We were thus not quite nameless," Jayber remembers, "but also not quite named" and "the effect was curious [...] we became in some way faceless to ourselves and to one another."[490] The erasure of his name is connected to his displacement and lack of

[487] Jeffrey Bilbro, *Virtues of Renewal: Wendell Berry's Sustainable Forms* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2019), 138.

[488] Wendell Berry, "The Long-Legged House," *The Long-Legged House and other essays* (Washington D.C.: Schoemaker & Hoard, 1969).

[489] Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2000), 31.

[490] Ibid

membership; as a child, Jayber remembers, he would "walk around saying [his] name to [himself]—'Jonah Crow, Jonah Crow'—until it seemed that it could never have belonged to me or to anybody else."[491] As Jayber reflects on this time in his life, he notes how this displacement and disconnection brought about a diseased form of life: "I was scared and out of place and (as I now see) odd. Not just lonely, but solitary, living as much as I could in secret, looking about, seeing much, revealing little."[492] But even as a child, Jayber remembers the longing he felt by being able to empathize with another nameless orphan, E. Lawler, who arrives at The Good Shepherd when she is about seven years old. Jayber recalls that she kept herself apart, like he did, from the group because "she was waiting" but he did not understand for what until "one day as her classmates were joining hands to play some sort of game, one of the girls broke the circle. She held out her hand to the newcomer to beckon her in."[493] What E. Lawler receives, and what Jayber longs for, is the welcome into fellowship with a community in which one belongs. And Jayber realizes that one of his own deepest longings is to find this place:

> I never quite felt that I was somewhere I wanted to be. Where I wanted to be, always, day in and day out, year in and year out, was Squires Landing and all that fall of country between Port William up on the ridge and the river between Sand Ripple and Willow Run. When I heard or read the word *home*, that patch of country was what I thought of. *Home* was one of the words I wrote in my tablet.[494]

For Jayber, though, such membership does not come easily and before he learns to dwell ecologically, his journey takes him into both a Christian and non-Christian community that both suffer from the adverse effect of a disembodied, excarnational form of life. From The Good

[491] Ibid, 32.
[492] Ibid, 38.
[493] Ibid, 39.
[494] Ibid, 36.

Shepherd, Jayber leaves to go to seminary in Pigeonville College after feeling the call to be a preacher. Jayber already notes his uneasiness with The Good Shepherd and its attempt to be a "world unto itself."[495] Although Jayber admits he cannot imagine a better way to run an orphanage, like Berry himself, he becomes suspicious of the people who choose to inhabit institutions and organizations, particularly Christian organizations, that are severed from the larger community of those who do not share their beliefs. Jayber transfers this wariness to the seminary of Pigeonville which has a "pious atmosphere" that makes him unsettled and "long for the open countryside and flowing streams."[496] This atmosphere, Jayber recalls, was "soapy and paperish and shut-in and a little stale. It didn't smell of anything bodily or earthly. […] It made me feel excluded from it, even while I was in it."[497] As I mentioned earlier, this is precisely the "excarnational" otherworldly theology of gnostic Christianity that Berry finds so troubling and, as I showed in Chapter 1, is a particularly post-Enlightenment theology beholden to the myth of disenchantment. The "rift" this creates between body and soul, earth and heaven, matter and spirit is, for Jayber, the source of unease. He can't abide his seminary training because "everything bad was laid on the body, and everything good was credited to the soul"; Jayber sees it "the other way around."[498]

But more than this, Jayber gets to a moment of what Charles Taylor calls secular "cross pressure," when he starts to doubt the faith in which he's raised. Much of the Christian teaching and reading of Scriptures troubles him. As he studies to become a preacher, he is haunted by doubts, particularly around questions of love and embodiment:

[495] Ibid, 33.
[496] Ibid, 48.
[497] Ibid, 49.
[498] Ibid

> I couldn't open a Bible without setting of a great jangling and wrangling of questions that almost deafened me. If we are to understand the Bible as literally true, why are we permitted to hate our enemies? […] And what about our bodies that always seemed to come off so badly in every contest with our soul? Did Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it?[499]

Jayber's questioning and doubting here is precisely how Taylor speaks about the cross-pressured nature of the secular age. It does not negate his faith, but changes it. Jayber, who at this point is still Jonah, even contemplates if his namesake in Scripture might be a helpful touchstone for making sense of the doubts that plague his "calling" to be a pastor and irrevocably shape his this-worldly focus. He wonders if "there [are] some things He [God] wants us to learn that we can't learn except by falling into the abyss?"[500] The language here is reminiscent of Wiman, too, whose journey to the edge of the "bright abyss" brings him into a renewed appreciation and love for a material world charged with God's presence. Of course, Jayber is not there in his journey yet; in fact, he compares himself to Dante at the start of his life-altering descent into the abyss of the inferno, land notes: "I could feel myself being changed—into what, I had no idea. […] I was a lost traveler wandering in the woods, needing to be on my way somewhere but not knowing where."[501]

The final straw for Jayber in his seminary degree occurs when he talks to his professor, Dr. Ardmire,[502] about prayer and wonders how we ever know the efficacy of a prayer if there is never any "proof." Whether or not a prayer to an unseen God achieves anything is largely outside the bounds of empirical proof. The young, cross-pressured Jayber meets a point of

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[499] Ibid, 50
[500] Ibid, 52.
[501] Ibid
[502] Yes, the naming here is a bit "on the nose." Dr. *Ardmire* means one who "loves earth."

fragilization, in which his childhood faith does not hold up to the scrutiny of reason. Jayber feels like his whole world has collapsed, and the "call" he had felt to become a preacher was an illusion. However, his professor comforts him by suggesting to Jayber that "you have been given questions to which you cannot be *given* answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time."[503] As becomes clear, Jayber's professor is noting that the most important form that theological understanding takes is a human life. The truth Jayber is after will not be found in abstract, theological propositions, but in a life well lived.

Yet it takes him some time to find that life. After leaving seminary, Jayber winds up wandering through Lexington and taking literature classes as he's able while working as a Barber on the side to create a small "nest egg"[504] of savings. The university becomes a place that introduces Jayber to the greater tradition of which he is a part; however, the university is also a place marked by the same detachment and displacement that so marred seminary for Jayber. While the theologies of excarnation marred theology for Jayber, the university with its "aloof"[505] professors equally marred learning. Jayber and the teachers who introduce him to the tradition have no communal relationship. There is no fellowship of belonging. And while the professors do ignite Jayber's wonder and respect, there is something also coldly transactional and utilitarian about the exchange. The university, representative for Jayber of the world of the future (which would be the late twentieth century) was "preparing people from the world of the past for the world of the future, but what was missing was the world of the present, where evert body was living its small, short, surprising, miserable, wonderful, blessed, damage, only life."[506] In this state of directionless wandering and disembededness from life, Jayber realizes how much of the

[503] Ibid, 54.
[504] Ibid, 62.
[505] Ibid, 69.
[506] Ibid, 71.

forces of modern, secular life—manifest in the church and in the school—champion a life that is ultimately marked by dis-ease. Before Jayber begins his homeward journey, he has an epiphany about the modern man he has become:

> I seemed to have come from nowhere. Without a loved life to live, I was becoming more and more a theoretical person, as if I might have been a figment of institutional self-justification: a theoretical ignorant person from the sticks, who one day would go to a theoretical somewhere and make a theoretical something of himself—the implication being that until he became that something he would be nothing.[507]

Swimming against the cultural currents Jayber feels a "motion of the heart toward [his] origins"[508] and begins his journey back to Port William. Jayber's desire to "move" is one of desire, one of love. This becomes significant not simply for his need to become a member of the Port William community (which he does) but also an ecological member of the earth. Such a membership, as Berry noted in his Jefferson lecture, "all turns on affection."[509]

Jayber's homecoming is prefaced by a flood that becomes symbolic of a watery new birth both for the landscape and for Jayber. As Jayber floats along the river he sees the entire countryside being unmade, houses are toppling, and debris is scattered all across the water as it surges. In the midst of this, Jayber's memory recalls the opening lines of Genesis and the creation account and through his experience Jayber finally comes to a new form of knowledge, or a new understanding of his childhood faith, concerning how the material world is enchanted by the creative spirit of God; Jayber recalls his epiphany:

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[507] Ibid, 73.
[508] Ibid.
[509] Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essay* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012).

> And this is what it was like—the words were just right there in my mind, and I knew they were true: "the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." I'm not sure that I can tell you what was happening to me then, or what I know even now. At the time I surely wasn't trying to tell myself. But after all my years of reading in the a book and hearing it read and believing and disbelieving it, I seemed to have wandered my way back to the beginning—not just of the book, but of the world—and all the rest was yet to come. I felt knowledge crawl over my skin.[510]

Berry renders Jayber's homeward journey in terms that concern his understanding of the Bible and his understanding of the material world. As a particularly postsecular protagonist, Jayber's story is one marked by believing and disbelieving and, as readers, we are also left to puzzle out whether or not Jayber's experience is true or simply the fevered imaginings of a man steeped in Biblical traditions. Once Jayber is rescued from the chaos of the flood—the Genesis "waste and void"[511] of a pre-ordered creation—he is welcomed as a refugee into Port William where it becomes clear that he and the others with him are not "just a helpless, aimless mob of strays, but people were there who were in charge."[512] This realization becomes a profoundly important insight for Jayber as he sees the ordering love of humans at work bringing healing in the midst of destruction, direction in the midst of aimlessness, welcome in the midst of alienation. And as Jayber begins to sense that his own longings as a detached, wandering, "aloof" young man are starting to be met here, he again has a poignant reflection on why this good work of the Port William community is connected to a world enchanted along Christian lines. By being unsettled

[510] *Jayber Crow*, 79.
[511] An allusion to Genesis 1:1.
[512] Ibid, 82.

by his alienation and disconnection from his home, Jayber becomes a version of what Taylor calls the "porous" self, open to the possibility of a material reality that is enchanted by God's ongoing presence:

> I knew that the Spirit that had gone forth to shape the world and make it live *was still alive in it.* I just had no doubt. I could see that I lived in the created world, and *it was still being created*. I would be part of it forever. There was no escape. *The Spirit that made it was in it, shaping it and reshaping it,* sometimes lying at rest, sometimes standing up and shaking itself, like a muddy horse, and letting the pieces fly. [emphasis added] [513]

Jayber's entrance into the membership of Port William is a case study in how one belongs to the earth and to a community in healthy and healing ways.

Berry's postsecular vision of a re-enchanted world still tasks humans with the responsibilities of good, stewardly work, but also relieves them of the burden—one poignantly felt in the Anthropocene—that the entire material world depends solely on them. This is not to say that bad human work will not destroy the world, perhaps even in irrevocable ways. Berry makes it very clear that our work has this destructive, desecrating potency throughout his essays and in *Jayber Crow*. He is no naïve optimist. Rather, it is to say that his vision of a world enchanted by God's Spirit who brings and sustains coherence and order in the material world are so beyond human comprehension and control that there remains a hope that *good* human work is always the *response* to an invitation from the ordered world and the God who created it to participate. Humans can actively share in this work that precedes and proceeds us and work with the grain and within the limits of the created order. If they do not, and choose diseased work,

[513] Ibid, 83.

they can struggle against it by their "arrogant ignorance" and seek mastery and control over that which ultimately cannot be fully mastered or controlled.

In "The Way of Ignorance," Berry argues that it is indeed the "arrogant ignorance" of the modern world that presumes it knows enough to accomplish its narrow ends and foresee and control all outcomes.[514] Berry's "way" of ignorance (which connects to his "way of love") is for a humbled ignorance that realizes our actions in the world have consequences for indeterminate generations to come: "Adam was the first, but not the last,, to choose for the whole human race."[515] Yet humble ignorance does not lead to escapism from responsibility. There is no real choice between using or not using the land; the question is between good and bad use: "we cannot exempt ourselves from use, we must deal with the issues raised by use."[516] What is needed is an artful approach to the sacred earth, "practices that sustain life by connecting us conservingly to our places and our world, the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us."[517] Work becomes the practical embodiment of a theological vision of a good yet broken world that requires faithful, careful, attentive labour to bring about health not only of humans, but of all living creatures that have been "given" to humans to care for.

"For Berry," Kimberly Smith argues, "labor is morally significant not because it creates wealth but because labor is our primary means of relating to the physical and social world: it mediates our relationship to nature (by working the land) and to our community (to the extent we work together or for each other).[518] Berry argues that this work of stewardship over the earth creates a "predicament" because we are forced into using gifts that we do not fully understand.

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[514] "The Way of Ignorance," 53.
[515] *Life is a Miracle*, 77.
[516] "The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity," 73.
[517] Wendell Berry, "Renewing Husbandry," *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006.
[518] Kimberly Smith, 156.

Jeffrey Bilbro notes that what undergirds Berry's vision, and helps us make sense of this predicament, is that human affection and desire, human love, is something that makes good, responsible work possible: "Love for the life and health of a holy world naturally leads us to imagine how we can participate in healing broken places and preserving abundant life."[519] Bilbro's words are particularly helpful in making sense of the uneasiness that faces the Anthropocene. Because beneath the malaise that characterizes our late modern world is a desire to see the world not as it currently is, but in a healthier form that we imagine. Whether or not we believe fully realizing this image is ever possible is beside the point here. Berry's argument is that when we love a place and, in time, belong to it as it belongs to us, we can start to respond to the land's needs by love. In "People, Land, and Community" Berry lays out this theme (which is found in so many of his essays and novels and poems) quite explicitly:

> When one buys a farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts. One's work may be defined in part by one's visions, but it is defined in part too by problems, which the work leads to and reveals. And daily life, work, and problems alter the visions. It invariably turns out, I think, that one's first vision of one's place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one's sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one's love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one's vision gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life—all have changed by mutual correction. One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is.[520]

[519] *Loving God's Wildness,* 151.

[520] Wendell Berry, "People, Land, and Community," *Standing by Words: Essays* (Washington: Shoemaker Schoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 70.

Jayber's story is, ultimately, about learning to see where he is and learning how to work and live and love as a responsible member of the broken Port William community.

Jayber takes up his role as a barber in the community and, with the help of Burley Coulter, gets set up as a rather precarious member of the community who is always on the margins with one foot in and one foot out. This choice of narrator, at least for this story of the Port William community, allows Berry to survey a range of different members and criticize and evaluate their work. While there are numerous members one could pay attention to, the two most instructive examples of work done well and work done poorly are Athey Keith and his son-in-law, Troy Chatham. Through these characters Jayber begins to understand what it looks like to dwell humbly and healthily as an ecological being and, conversely, what it looks like to live into the modern mythologies of placeless, autonomous, limitless, economic and technological man.

Athey Keith, named after the Greek notion of wisdom, is Berry's image of the ideal farmer who over the course of his life learns precisely how to work with and for the material world. As Jayber recalls the farm of Athey, he notes a few things that reveal the type of artful good work Berry considers necessary for the ongoing survival of the world:

> Athey Keith was one of the best farmers in the Port William neighborhood in his time. […] Everything on his place, including the crops and animals, was well kept and looked good. For Athey would have it no other way.
>
> Athey used his land conservatively. In any year, by far the greatest part of his land would be under grass – for, as he would say, "The land slopes even in the bottoms, and the water runs." He was always studying his fields, thinking of ways to protect them. He was doing what a lot of farmers say they want to do: he was improving his land; he was going

to leave it better than he had found it. […] "Wherever I look," he said, "I want to see more than I need, and have more than I use."

Athey logged the woodlands on the main tract only for firewood and the posts and lumber he needed on the place. The woods beyond the branch he never used at all. This was maybe the finest stand of trees in our part of the country, and Athey was proud of it. He protected it from timber buyers by asking considerably more for it than its market value. As long as he could make a living farming, that patch of timber would always be worth more to him than to them.

Athey was not exactly, or not only, what is called a "landowner." He was the farm's farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived his; he knew that, of the two lives, his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter.[521]

For Athey, the household of the earth becomes his dwelling. He understands his life as one that is completely interdependent upon it and humbly acknowledges that his life is small in relation to the world that will outlast him. Athey uses the land, but within healthy limits that allow it to remain healthy and productive as a resource he and future generations can come to again and again. He is also a protector and a keeper of the land, leaving some of it wild and refusing to sell it to the highest bidder because he knows that such an economic gain would, ultimately, be a loss for the household or *oikois*, an economic loss. By his careful, attentive work, Athey's wise use of the land allows him both delight and sustenance as he carefully cultivates his place to be a source of abundance.

In sharp contrast, Berry depicts Athey's son-in-law Troy, named aptly after a city that falls due to infidelity (a corrupted form of love). Jayber notes that they "were different, almost

[521] *Jayber Crow,* 178 – 181.

opposite, kinds of men,"[522] which the story bears out as Troy begins to farm and becomes the embodiment of a man seemingly captivated by the myth of disenchantment and who orders his life along its basic premises of what the world is and how he ought to relate to it. Jayber takes an almost immediate dislike to Troy, even when Troy is a cocky young boy who is arrogant and selfish.[523] Troy eventually marries Mattie Chatham (Daughter of Athey Keith) and they move to one of Athey's farms as tenants (stewards, of a sort). Like a Miltonic Satan, Troy works without any regards for his creaturely limits or the limits imposed on him by the gift of the land he is to work: " 'Wherever I look, I want to see more than I need,' Troy said in effect, 'Whatever I see, I want."[524] It is hardly surprising that Troy, later, is caught by Jayber Crow having an affair outside of his marriage. Troy's character is marked by a desire, an appetite, that is curbed by no healthy boundaries. This impulse translates to his use of the land: "What he asked of the land was all it had. He had hardly got his first crop in the ground before he began to say things critical of Athey and his ways. 'Why, hell!' he would say, "'it's hard to tell what that old place would produce if he would just plow it."[525] Troy acts as if he transcends the earth as a disembedded self and pursues the technology that will help him employ his dominance and mastery over-and-against the land. Like Athey, Troy is motivated by desire and imagination; however, his desire is for selfish gain rather than service and his imagination is of limitless wealth rather than ongoing health with marginal returns. Troy embodies the "new way" of twentieth century farming as science-industry-technology in service to a totalizing economy: "The new way of farming was a way of dependence, not on land and creatures and neighbors but on machines and fuel and chemicals of all sorts, bought things, and on the sellers of bought things—which made it finally a

[522] Ibid, 181.
[523] Ibid, 135.
[524] Ibid, 181.
[525] Ibid.

dependence on credit."[526] Troy's tractors help him work beyond the limits of the sun, into the night, and his debt forces him to work beyond the limits of what the land can produce. Rather than serving his work and the land through his work, Troy soon has to serve the interest on his debt and becomes a wage-slave to a farm that must produce more and grow larger.[527]

As Troy works, Jayber notices that he is embodying an entirely new "way" of being in the world, a "way" that I have connected to the myth of disenchantment that detaches individuals from one another and from the earth:

> The work of the farm now went on at two different rates of speed and power and endurance. It became hard to cooperate, not because cooperation was impossible but because the tractor and the teams embodied two different kinds of will, almost two different intentions.[528]

Athey and Troy represent two imaginations and two desires for the land that are in stark contrast. As Jayber finds his uneasy place in the membership of Port William, he needs to learn how to grow into the form of life that will bring health or destruction. And in addition to the books he has read, he also has to choose between the way of Troy and the way of Athey. And as becomes clear, Jayber's inclusion into a way of love all returns back to his particularly Christian vision of a re-enchanted world. That is, his ability to love his place, his community, and Mattie properly as a creature are ways that he can participate in a world that is not only sustained by God's attention but also, as Berry argues, God's enduring love.

For Jayber, finding a way to dwell ecologically in the world through love centers upon the place of Port William and the person of Mattie Keith Chatham, the wife of Troy and the

[526] Ibid, 183.
[527] Ibid, 339.
[528] Ibid, 186.

daughter of Athey. In a way that is reminiscent of Dante first meeting the young Beatrice as told in *Vita Nuova*—the New Life—Jayber sees Mattie Keith and is "moved by her prettiness" and recalls how her "brief, laughing look that she had given [him] made [him] feel extraordinarily seen, as if after that [he] might be visible in the dark."[529] Later Jayber again reflects on Mattie's eyes and smile, remembering that she "was a clear-spirited girl with all her feeling right there in her eyes […] and with a good openhearted smile."[530] Again, Berry's use of Dante as a key intertext[531] is important, particularly as it introduces a form of Medieval beatific vision common in the enchanted Middle Ages. The smile of Beatrice becomes the vehicle by which Dante is moved both to a love for Beatrice and to the source of love for which Beatrice is only a vehicle.[532] Through his journey, Dante learns, paradoxically, that the love he experiences for Beatrice—one that is at first erotic, but then allegorical and symbolic—participates in the same love that moves the cosmos. Berry, writing in the secular age of the late twentieth century, tries to recover a Dantean vision of the world through his wandering pilgrim Jayber.

Like Dante, Jayber's love for a woman already married is likely bound to be frustrated or become grounds for an affair that would be precisely the limitless freedom Berry believes is so destructive not only to marriages but also to the earth.[533]And indeed, Jayber must slowly cultivate his desire to restrain it from such reckless and destructive action. Before he truly falls in love with Mattie, Jayber starts to see a young waitress, Clydie where for a couple years they meet up for weekend escapes. There is no commitment, and Jayber's relationship to Clydie is free and made possible by his car that allows him to leave Port William for some weekend

[529] Ibid, 9 – 10.
[530] Ibid, 134.
[531] For more on this, see Dominic Manganiello, "Dante and Wendell Berry's Modern Book of Memory," *Memory and Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007).
[532] See: Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (London: Apocryphile Press, 2005).
[533] Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

excitement. Jayber's relationship with Clydie is associated with his mobility and freedom and it provides him a happiness that is not tethered to any real obligation.

His fling with Clydie ends, however, when one night they are dancing and Jayber sees Troy there dancing with another woman other than his wife, Mattie. Troy sees Jayber and "raises his hand to [him] with the thumb and forefinger joined in a circle"[534] as if he and Jayber had some secret pact. Troy's sign of the circle alludes the infernal rings of hell's architecture, which, later, Jayber recalls again noting the diabolical power of discontentment in one's given place and circumstances: "There is always a better place for a person to live, a better work to do, a better spouse to wed, better friends to have. This surely describes one of the circles of Hell, and who hasn't traveled around it a time or two?"[535] Jayber understands that Troy's infidelity to be a betrayal of Mattie, yet he also recognizes that perhaps he is not as different from Troy as he would like to believe. Sick to his stomach, Jayber escapes from the dance hall and leaves Clydie (and eventually his automobile) behind forever.

After Jayber is "overcome with a love for [Mattie]"[536] he still must temper his imagination which starts to delude him into caricatures of both Troy's evil and his own worthiness. His disordered imagination fantasizes about escaping with Mattie in his car to be "free of all its [i.e. The world's] claims."[537] Jayber's car is an important feature of his vision, for it represents the "speed and violence" that were the "full expression of [his] love."[538] In a sense, Jayber's image of Mattie parallel Troy's image of his farm. Both are untethered from the realities and limits of the giveness of their place and circumstances; both seek to transcend these real

[534] *Jayber Crow,* 237.
[535] Ibid, 210.
[536] Ibid, 191.
[537] Ibid, 197.
[538] Ibid

limits into the false imaginations and fantasies of a no place and a no one. However, unlike Troy, Jayber realizes his error: "I would have been asking for her life, for the power to change her into what could not be foreseen. If I destroyed what already existed, what would I replace it with? For something always exists before you get there with your desires and visions…"[539] Troy, on the other hand, remains "incoherent and obscure within himself […] a wishful thinker. A dreamer. His mere dream had led him into the reality of endless work and struggle. […] He was an escapee."[540] Realizing this, Jayber starts to become "a man unimaginable to Troy Chatham, a man he could not imagine raising his hand to with the thumb and forefinger circled"; yet in order to do this, he must also "become a man yet unimaginable to [him]self."[541] Jayber begins to love in a way that accepts the given world beyond his own ego. He is not simply able to love and manipulate and control the world as a deluded dreamer; rather, he must attend to its giveness and respond within its boundaries through a selfless love meant to serve the greater common good, even if that means foregoing certain pleasures and happiness in the present.

Jayber puts aside his delusions, largely because he realizes how hopeless they are, and begins to become an interdependent, healthy member of Port William: "I saw myself as I was and my circumstances as they were, I loved her more, and more clearly than I did before. I became able to imagine her as she was and not as a subject of a dream. […] I seemed to see her whole."[542] He then goes on to promise to become the "faithful husband" of Mattie that Troy will never be. Jayber's declaration of a true, healing love here is once again attended by a vision of a world enchanted along Christian parameters. Jayber is not the source of meaning and the words he speaks and the thoughts he has are held accountable to something other than himself and even

[539] Ibid, 196.
[540] Ibid, 241.
[541] Ibid
[542] Ibid, 198.

other than the Port William membership: "I tremble to say so," Jayber writes, "but when I had given that assent, it seemed that there were watchers watching in the dark who all of a sudden could see me."[543] It is no coincidence that Jayber's sense of being seen here is paralleled to his earlier sense of "being seen" by the laughing eyes of Mattie. Berry is revealing here that Jayber's responsibility—his ability to respond—is not simply to one's place or community (although it is that too), but ultimately to the unseen God whose love animates the world and whose Being comprehends its creatures.

While Jayber's doubts in Christianity remain, and while the Port William "believers" are still confronted with otherworldly theologies of excarnation, Jayber starts to understand that his own desire to be a committed, loving husband to Mattie (unbeknownst to her) puts him on the "way of love."[544] And this love, much like Berry's own novel, eludes the grasp of utilitarian reason: "Love is always more than a little strange. It is not explainable or even justifiable. We do not make it. If it did not happen to us, we could not imagine it. […] It is in the world but is not altogether of it. It is of eternity. It takes us there when it most holds us here."[545] It does not (or should not) draw one away from the world as an escapee but helps one to fix one's eyes with attention and affection to the time and place in which one finds oneself. Jayber's revelation is followed by a return, albeit an uneasy one, to his native faith. After all his wanderings and his doubts, Jayber begins to pray the prayer that so troubled him during his seminary days: "Thy [God's] will be done."[546] Jayber notes that "not a single one of my doubts ever left me. They had, in fact, got worse."[547] But what I argue is his postsecular condition leads Jayber to

[543] Ibid, 243.
[544] Ibid, 248.
[545] Ibid, 249.
[546] Ibid, 250.
[547] Ibid

appreciate the this-worldly love God has for the physical world, and for particular persons and places: "'God loves Port William as it is,' I thought, 'Why else should He want it to be better than it is?'"[548]

Jayber realizes that Christian preachers, by focusing only on the second part of John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life") were fixated on an otherworldly salvation. However, Jayber realizes,

> [I]f God loved the world even before the event at Bethlehem, that meant he loved it as it was, with all its fault. […] That His love contains all the world does not show that the world does not matter, or that He and we do not suffer it unto death; it shows that the world is Hell only in part. But his love can contain it only by compassion and mercy which, if not Hell entirely, would be at least a crucifixion.[549]

Jayber then imagines—and Berry asks his readers to imagine—"God looking down upon [Port William], its lives living by His spirit, breathing by His breath, knowing by His light, but each life living also inescapably by its own will—His own body given to be broken."[550] Jayber remarks that this is his conversion, a typical moment in postsecular narratives: "…there was no longer with me any question of what is called "belief." It was not a "conversion" in the usual sense, as thought I had been altogether out and now was altogether in. It was more as though I had been in a house and a storm had blown off the roof. […] I had changed, and the sign of it was only that my own death now seemed to me by far the least important thing in my life."[551]

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[548] Ibid, 251.
[549] Ibid
[550] Ibid, 252.
[551] Ibid

And death comes, the key moment, Charles Taylor suggests, of fragilization and cross-pressure in the disenchanted world. It is the limit of the known for creaturely life. Not even Jayber's belief can fully comprehend it. The story of *Jayber Crow* is filled with death: the death of the small town of Port William, the death of the agrarian way of life, and the death of Mattie Chatham. All of these things "disintegrate" over the course of the twentieth century that spans Jayber's life. While Wendell Berry's vision of a re-enchanted world does offer a counter-voice to the myth of disenchantment that continues to linger, he is far from naively optimistic that it can undo the momentum of an Anthropocene world where industrialized technologies in service to a Global economy. Indeed, as *Jayber Crow* comes to a close the township of Port William is all but gone and the Nest Egg—a tract of untouched land—owned by Athey Keith and given to Mattie is being logged by Troy as Mattie lies dying in a hospital.

The "Nest Egg" was "fifty or so acres of big timber"[552] where "everything seemed to belong where it was."[553] This is the ordered, coherent material world, uncultivated by man. In "Two Economies," Berry calls this realm of nature the "Kingdom of God" because it "includes everything; in it, the fall of every sparrow is a significant event. We are in it whether we know it or not and whether we wish to be or not."[554] The "Nest Egg" becomes a place of refuge for both Mattie and Jayber in their old age, and it's a place where, again, the world is rendered to be an enchanted, communicative reality: "The place spoke for us and was a kind of speech."[555] Yet even this place is not free from the power and "arrogant ignorance" that leads Troy to desecrate and destroy it.

[552] Ibid, 344.
[553] Ibid, 346.
[554] Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," *Home Economics* (New York: North Point, 1987), 186.
[555] *Jayber Crow,* 349.

Ultimately, Jayber's decision to live according to the way of love and to imitate Christ by loving particular people and particular places in all their givenness seems futile. Despite all this, Jayber still claims "this is a book about Heaven" but he also notes "it has been a close call; Hell would be, for Jayber, the failure "to love one another" and "where there is such a groaning travail of selfishness in all its forms" that there is nothing but destruction. [556] But Jayber provides a postsecular call to continue hoping despite the malaise of our Anthropocene moment, and to have faith where understanding fails: "Faith is not necessarily, or not soon, a resting place. Faith puts you out on a wide river in a little boat, in the fog, in the dark."[557] In other words, Jayber has journeyed to his end and arrived at his beginning, but now sees it more clearly. Like the man in the well Jayber talks about, his "belief is a kind of knowledge beyond any way of knowing" that challenges the claims of a secular age beholden to a reductionist form of reason. This belief urges him to go on loving the creatures all around him in whose life he shares, attentive to their needs, responsive to their lives.

Berry's vision of a reenchanted world in *Jayber Crow* urges us to become re-embedded in our places, remembering their stories and stewarding the good gifts that they are responsibly but not naively. In many ways, the novel is the enactment of the argument Berry makes in *Life is a Miracle*. By attending to the world and living, ironically, into the way of ignorance, Jayber suddenly knows himself as a creature who belongs to the membership of Port William. Attending carefully to the mysterious and miraculous life upon which all human culture depends, Berry's prose and novels urge us to consider imagining the earth's wholeness, holiness, and health while we undertake the work necessary of making this good earth our home.

[556] Ibid, 354.
[557] Ibid, 356.

AFTERWORD:

Practicing Re-enchantment

Over a year ago, during the completion of this project in fact, my wife and I along with our four children (and one Labrador retriever) moved to a small acreage just outside of Hamilton in the small farming town of Binbrook. The move in conjunction with the project forced me to confront several uncomfortable ironies: How might I care for this tangible, physical place through something as abstract as academic work? How could I champion local places while writing as a Canadian about American literature? And of course: what does my Christian faith, after all of this, *actually* even mean for how I—how we—will dwell in this place?

In the preface I noted that I grew up in a rural, largely agrarian community. In many ways, what I learned about yard work and Christianity—for better and for worse—was cultivated in Niagara, by my family and larger community. But to have your own house and property is to enter into new forms of responsibility. This place is now, for whatever time we have it, one that I want to know and care for. I want it to become our home.

There is a small creek which runs through our property. It is actually a drainage swale from about four hundred acres of surrounding fields. I looked on the map to see if this creek had a name or fed any larger bodies of water. It turns out that the creek is nameless but is one of many tributaries that eventually leads to Chippewa Creek, which leads to the Grand River, then to Lake Erie and on to Lake Ontario and, finally, out to the Atlantic Ocean. My son, Jackson, decided one day to name our tiny contribution to the great oceans "Frog Creek," in honour of the hours he spends catching bullfrogs and tree frogs there.

I was struck by this innate human desire we have to name things. What is it that makes us see water trickle with the force of gravity and to provide a name for it? In our first year here, we

bought animal and insect guides and downloaded apps to identify tree species by bark and leaf patterns. We learned that the trees in our backyard were actually English Oak and Shagbark Hickory, Red Maple and Curly Willow and Trembling Aspen. The birds who lived here or were just migrating through were orioles, Cooper's hawks, nuthatches, finches, and even barn owls. There were coyotes and minks, possums and racoons. There were names everywhere.

To name the place and its inhabitants was a way of becoming attached to it and the whole invisible community of people who shared such names. Some of the names were ours, a sign of our unique relationship with "our" place. But most other names were like old growth forests of the mind, names passed down for centuries that helped identify the plants and animals who shared our surroundings. This was their home too.

But to name a place is not to know it. At least not completely. We also learned that some of the species (like Red Maple and Wild Grape Vine) were invasive and destructive. The gypsy moths with their iridescent, dusty wings were beautiful to behold, but terrible in their destructive potential. A beautiful English Oak was completely defoliated in late August. To name the world was only the beginning of our response-ability. What does it mean when "Frog Creek" bursts it banks (as it did in our first Fall) and the soil erosion threatens your neighbour's home? What happens to the plant life under the domineering canopy of the Red Maple or the tangled mess of Grape Vine? What does it mean when the stagnant waters of the creek in July grow a bubbly film on the surface?

That the land is not simply something we speak to, but something we hear is to acknowledge the world as a particularly enchanted place. The beauty of it—given with such wild abandon—arrests our attention and humbles us in all its miraculous complexity. There is such a profusion of life forms in constant states of change. Each season unfolds layers of life and

entangled relationships to which we are simply ignorant, bumbling witnesses. Yet the world also groans and its desecration—at our hands or the hands of others—cries out. But one needs the ears to hear and the eyes to look and see. The creek near our home is awash in the chemical fertilizers and pesticides that runoff from the surrounding industrial farms. The forests ache under the neglect that allows grapevine to strangle and topple mighty Oak trees and soft, pulpy Birch. And learning to listen and then hear some of these cries ineluctably leads one to a distinctly human choice: do we partake in healing or destructive work.

In the past year we have repaired a crumbled foundation, installed a new septic system that was polluting the waterway, regraded the entire property and sowed new grass to stop erosion. We continue to look for ways in which life—not just ours—might thrive here building owl boxes and bat boxes. As we did much of this work, I was struck particularly by the writing of Marilynne Robinson and her Calvinist rumination that the entire world—even our little speck of earth in Binbrook—is part of the vast theater of God's glory. As a Christian—even one with Calvinist disposition— I tried to see our little place in the world through this lens. What does it mean to live, I wondered, as if this were true? It was hard. I want to see this land as *mine*.

My grandfather was a superb gardener. He passed that on to my mother and, I think, to most of her children. He died over a decade ago now and the other day my wife and I drove up to the house where he and my "Oma" lived for decades. The gardens he had were the stuff of fantasy and legend in my young mind. But when we drove up to this home, the entire yard was in disarray. The house was shabby and unkempt. The gardens were wild and overgrown. There was no sign of life or love there at all.

To experience a place as part of God's theatre is in a way to reconfigure your own work as a responsive participation in the work God is always, already doing without you. The world is

no less God's theatre in my grandfather's neglected yard than it was in its glory years where he was diligently stewarding his home. Such a theocentric view—one we see particularly in Berry and Robinson and Wiman's work—forces one to imagine the world as a place that can do without them. Or as Wiman and Pastor Ames might frame it, it is to allow our deaths to give shape and form to our life. This home I now call mine was, strangely enough, unknown to me not even three years ago. Whatever damage and good I inherit from its previous tenants need my response here and now. Whatever damage or good I do, will be passed on to someone else. But ultimately in a century, who knows what will become of this place. It might, like my grandfather's be overtaken by weeds and neglect. It might be stewarded by some great-grandchild. I don't know.

But if the world is God's theatre, the troubling fact of my work's seeming futility also comes as a certain form relief. It is not to say it makes one optimistic, but rather that it circumscribes the hubris with which we—with which I—am tempted to approach my relationship to my place: as if home making on his strange wild planet in all the eons of time all depended on me and my family. As if the world's value was contingent on what humans do to it. Understanding work as the stewarding of God's theatre is simultaneously to dignify the power of work and to humble it in the acknowledgment of its final powerlessness.

At the opening of this project I noted that the world's desecration creates a certain uneasiness, a certain malaise, in the Anthropocene era in which we live. To understand the world as God's, I argue, relieves that malaise through a new myth of re-enchantment. It gives us a different story from which to perceive, experience, and act in the natural world. The world, from this story, is to be approached as a gift. The world exceeds our human grasp and calls us into affectionate work to care for it within the radius of our competence and ability. It demands a

particular response. Re-enchantment is not—or should not be—an abstract notion, but a set of particular practices borne out of an entire form of life, shaped by a story.

However, such a Christian myth of re-enchantment leaves one with a different malaise. The uneasiness comes with the realization that humans are not, finally, the center of it all. All of us, even with our homes and our lineages, are just so many pilgrims passing through. The home is nothing but a road. We are constantly in motion towards a world in which we are not. This leads one, ineluctably, to the cross-pressure of belief in the secular age. Because all paths eventually lead us beyond all the familiar landmarks of existence and experience and towards an unknown of what (if anything) lies beyond mortal limits.

As I watch my children work alongside me, I am preparing them, ultimately, for a world in which I am not. In fact, I am also preparing them for a world in which they are not. I don't know in fifty years let alone one hundred what will become of this place, myself, or even them. It's unnerving, to be sure. As I type these final notes, the leaves have (once again) fallen, they are golden and scattered and dying. My children and I have gathered some of them and, with some water and some topsoil, we're hoping that they will compost and be the start of our vegetable garden next spring. What we get out will be a matter of what we put in. This is a basic truth, Berry says, of agriculture. No culture survives without attending to this simple, mundane miracle.

What we put in gives rise to the life that comes out.

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